



The Curse of Nutgrass

By Deborah Birge, Fort Bend Master Gardener

Just google the phrase, "how to kill nutgrass?", you will find an endless list of articles addressing this very common problem. After the historical freeze this past February, I actually had the thought that maybe the nutgrass would die along with all my beloved plants. But no. This year my beds seem to be extra filled with the stuff. The freeze just made it angry.

I have been fighting back nutgrass since I started gardening decades ago. I have learned a few lessons and I've studied alternatives. So let discuss some of the successes and a few of the failures.

First, nutgrass is not even a grass, it is a sedge. Nutsedge (*Cyperus esculentus*) is a native of Africa. It has the ability to thrive in the worst or best conditions making it extremely invasive. Researching methods of ridding my beds of this pest brought me to an article, *Going Nuts over Nutsedge*, Extension Education, Travis County. This article describes how the nutgrass grows.



- New plants grow from tubers. The tuber's skin contains a chemical that inhibits sprouting. Moisture removes this inhibitor and allows sprouting.
- When the sprout reaches the surface it forms a basal bulb. Roots grow from this bulb to form more bulbs.
- In one year, the outward growth from one tuber has the potential to produce 1,900 new plants and 7,000 new tubers.
- Each tuber has seven viable buds. Remove one, another grows.

- For control to be effective, hand pulling must outlast the tuber's ability to regenerate or an herbicide must translocate down and kill the tuber.

Did you read where it says one tuber has the potential to produce 1,900 new plants and 7,000 new tubers? No wonder this seems to be an endless battle. The good news is tubers do not last more than three years.

A complication to consider when planning for chemical treatments is location of the weed. My concentration of nutgrass is in my rose and bulb bed. Each rose bush was a gift on Mother's Day and hidden bulbs are tucked here and there. The use of chemicals such as glyphosate (Roundup) or halosulfuron-methyl (Sedgehammer) are not an option for fear of unintentional damage to one or more plants.

This means hand pulling is my first line of defense. There are certain strategies we can use to make this a more rewarding and effective process. First, consider how nutgrass grows.

This photo shows how bulbs are connected by long roots. When weeding it is important to gently tug out the bulbs with each sprout of grass. You must then dig for the tuber. This can be made easier by following a few guidelines.



- Wet the area to be weeded. This will enable you to tug out the bulbs and tubers.
- Dig the tubers with a sturdy, long tool since they are usually several inches to a foot below ground.
- After weeding, place a layer of cardboard (plain corrugated, not painted) over the area.
- Add a layer of hardwood mulch, 3-4”.

Do not be fooled that you are finished with the nutgrass. Unfortunately, it will be back but less dense and vigorous. Start this process early in the spring, repeat when necessary and by June you should have the area controlled and will be ready to start again in the cooler months. And remember, the tubers only live three years.

Resources:

- <https://travis-tx.tamu.edu/about-2/horticulture/plant-problems-and-maintenance/going-nuts-over-nutsedge/>
- <https://agrillifeextension.tamu.edu/library/landscaping/nutsedge-and-kylina-species-control-for-homeowners/>
- <https://travis-tx.tamu.edu/about-2/horticulture/plant-problems-and-maintenance/>
- http://publications.tamu.edu/TURF_LANDSCAPE/PUB_turf_Herbicides%20for%20Weed%20Control%20in%20Turfgrass.pdf