



**University of Missouri Delta Center  
Commercial Agriculture Program  
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## **SANDBUR CONTROL**

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**Puncturevine and Sandbur.** Southeast Missouri has two thorny weeds that cause problems in lawns on sandy soils. Puncturevine (or goathead as it is often called) is pictured below on the right. It is a broadleaf plant that makes seeds with strong woody thorns that can puncture tires. These seeds tend not to stick to shoelaces and clothing. Puncturevine is controlled relatively easily with any number of postemergence broadleaf herbicides (like Weed-B-Gon and Trimec).

However, this guide focuses on sandbur, which is a grass. Sandbur (pictured on the left below) has smaller needle-like seeds with hooks or barbs that allow them to stick to shoestrings, clothing and pet hair. Controlling weedy grasses that are growing with desirable grasses can be a little more difficult. A general rule of thumb is to remember that sandbur behaves basically the same as crabgrass. You will find many crabgrass products at garden centers, since crabgrass is a nation-wide weed. Sandbur generally isn't mentioned since it is limited to sandy soils in the Southern US.



**Figure 1. Sandbur left and puncturevine right. Sandbur is controlled by standard “crabgrass-type” turf herbicides and puncturevine is controlled with standard broadleaf type turf herbicides.**

Sandburs like two things: 1) Sandy ground and 2) sunlight. A sandbur problem is due, in part to you having bare spots in your lawn. A contributing factor is that sandy soil tends to be very droughty and unfertile, making it even harder to grow desirable grasses.

**One of the first rules of lawn weed control (including sandbur) is to maintain a healthy lawn.** This may mean having your soil tested and using fertilizer and watering as needed. Thick, healthy grass chokes out many weeds.

A common Southeast-Missouri wife's tail is to apply lime to control sandbur. Lime does not control sandbur. However, most Southeast Missouri soils need lime (because they are acid). It is true that liming will help desirable turfgrass to grow, and that healthy grass will reduce your weed problems, but lime is not a sandbur control.

If you have a bad sandbur problem, consider watering and fertilizing your lawn. Some lime may be needed; however, it is best to bring a soil sample to your county extension office for testing to determine how much lime is needed for good soil fertility.

**The next step in sandbur control is to determine how hard you want to work on the problem.** As stated before, sandbur (and all weeds for that matter) are looking for a thin spot or a bare spot to grow. It is impossible to eliminate sandbur problems with a single herbicide application. Instead, you need to think in terms of an extended control program for a couple of years, followed by a maintenance program. If you work diligently, you may be able to go a year or two without making treatments, but sandbur is a weed and therefore is waiting for its next chance to grow in your yard.

**Herbicide application can be complicated.** Read and follow all label directions and carefully apply the products so as not to exceed the maximum rate. With all lawn herbicides a good recommendation is to apply ½ of the recommended rate while walking one direction (East to West for example), and then apply the other ½ of the rate walking in an opposite direction (North to South). This half-rate-two-trip method usually results in a more even application of your herbicide. Wear the safety clothing described on the label and wash clothes and hands after making the application.

Several guidesheets are available describing how to apply home pesticides, but to some extent, you will have to learn by doing. One good feature of most home pesticides is that there is a wide range of rates that you can use so you should be able to apply a rate which will control weeds, but not kill your desirable grass.

**If you have sandbur problems, you should first consider the application of a "preemergence crabgrass" herbicide in late winter.** "Crabgrass herbicides" control several other weedy grasses including sandbur. Preemergence herbicides should be applied around March 1. Another good rule of thumb is to apply preemergence herbicides when the forsythia bloom. Preemergence herbicides stop weeds from coming up, and may or may not affect weeds that are already growing. There are many preemergence crabgrass herbicides to choose from, and most do a good job. If you have a large yard, you might consider working with an agricultural chemical supplier to obtain lower-cost bulk versions. Weed and feed products that combine a preemerge and fertilizer are also available and good. Be careful to get a crabgrass product, as some weed and feed products target only broadleaf weeds.

If you want the best possible sandbur control, you need to plan to make a second preemergence application sometime in June. This treatment is optional; however, preemergence herbicides do not last season long, so if you want to attack sandbur aggressively, a second treatment should be considered.

**The second step in crabgrass control is postemergence control with a herbicide like MSMA.** Postemergence herbicides are sprayed on existing, actively growing weeds, and usually do little to stop new weed germination. At the lawn and garden store MSMA is often sold as “postemergence crabgrass control” or “postemergence nutsedge control”. But read the fine print- some post nutsedge herbicides do not control crabgrass or sandbur. As before, a “crabgrass herbicide” also controls other weedy grasses including sandbur. MSMA needs to be applied when temperatures are warm (above 80 degrees). MSMA usually causes some yellowing on your desirable grass. Therefore you should consider spot-spray applications. A general rule of thumb is to make two MSMA applications spaced approximately 10 days apart. This provides the best weedy grass control. MSMA is also available from farm-chemical suppliers if you have a large yard.

**The real answer is a program.** Lawn care and sandbur control can be a lot of work. Remember that the first step is good fertility. A program of a March premerge followed by a couple of postemergence MSMA applications is a very good start. If you have the time and energy, consider making the second preemergence application in June. You can also spray numerous MSMA applications through the summer, as often as every two weeks. Do not do this the entire summer as MSMA injures desirable grasses. Use common sense to decide how hard you want to work on your sandbur problem.

**Bare spots.** Remember if you have big spots of bare ground- sandbur will keep coming back until you established turfgrass there. Excessive use of preemergence herbicides and MSMA can slow the spread of desirable grasses like bermudagrass, and can harm grass seed. If you have a large bare spot, consider using a preemergence herbicide in the early spring only and then seeding bermudagrass in early August, or seeding Fescue in September. Again, common sense is the rule- Fertilize and water appropriately and use preemergence and postemergence herbicides on an as-needed basis. If there is a thick patch of sandbur, it needs to be killed back before your desirable grass will spread into it. But, be sure to give your desirable grass a chance to grow into bare spots. Bermudagrass and Zoysia will spread into bare spots. Fescue generally does not spread.

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