

How to Control Puncturevine

Central Oregon Ag Research Center advice

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Puncturevine or “bull head” is a common weed in driveways, around homes or in areas adjacent to cropland. Growing up I repeatedly learned the hard way about puncturevine and what it could do to bare feet and bike tires. I still wonder why those little bull heads can be so painful even after you pull them out!

It is a difficult weed to control because seeds can germinate throughout the summer. While the plants are still small enough to go un-noticed they can flower and produce viable seed. Once most people realize the plants are there and cut the plant at the base to remove it, many of the seeds have dropped to the ground to start the process all over again. This builds up a seed bank in the soil that can germinate later in the season or in future years.

Hoeing is a logical choice for control of puncturevine or other weeds. With germination of new plants throughout the summer, this is an ongoing process every couple of weeks to prevent seeds from forming. In small areas this may be the control method of choice, despite the need to hoe repeatedly.

Use of weed control products like Roundup is effective in killing puncturevine and is an option for larger areas. However, like hoeing, these types of herbicides need to be sprayed every 3 weeks throughout the summer to prevent “bull heads” or seeds. It is often unrealistic to expect landowners and local growers to treat this frequently.

Another option is to use an herbicide for weed control that prevents the seeds from germinating. These products are called pre-emergence herbicides because they are applied before the weeds start growing or emerging from the soil. These herbicides often need to be moved into the soil by irrigation following application. With this type of product you can prevent the problem before it starts, rather than treating the puncturevine after you see it.

Since these pre-emergence herbicides only last for a given period of time, application timing can be important in preventing puncturevine for the entire growing season. If the herbicide wears off and plants begin to appear later in the season, you may need to follow up with hoeing or another herbicide like Roundup.

A variety of these pre-emergence products are available to growers, but some can be purchased by homeowners as well. Pre-emergence herbicides available at garden stores include Preen or Casoron. As with all pesticides, it is important to follow the label when using these products.

Recent research on puncturevine control by the Central Oregon Agricultural Research Center indicated control of puncturevine 497 days after application was near 100 percent with Velpar (hexazinone) or Sahara (imazapyr+diuron). Puncturevine control in right-of-ways is complicated by gravelly soil conditions that limit the effectiveness of these pre-emergence herbicides.

If you take the opportunity to think ahead, you may be able to take care of your puncturevine problem before it starts. It is a good bet that where you found plants last year is where the seeds are concentrated and plants will show up this year. These would be the areas to treat sooner than later if you choose to use one of these pre-emergence products. However you chose to approach the problem, wouldn't it be nice to win one this time around in the battle against puncturevine?

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