

## Extension Notes

Personal Column for May 4, 2010

By Gary Hall, Iowa State University Regional Extension Education Director

### Creeping Charlie – Is he on your most unwanted list?

Oh if I could just find a silver bullet for Charlie. Also known as Creeping Charlie, ground ivy, Creeping Jenny, Ground-Over-the-Gill and a few other names which would rhyme with \*\$#@!^. You have probably noticed this low growing weed but few know how to control it properly. Let me help with some information.

Identification is the first step. Creeping Charlie, *Glechoma hederacea*, indeed creeps with long stems that root at the leaf nodes. The perennial plants have kidney bean-shaped leaves with scalloped leaf margins and small purplish blue flowers. The flowers almost look like miniature snapdragons.

If creeping Charlie is in the lawn, consider why Charlie is growing and the lawn isn't. Often it is in areas too shady for grass. Consider improving lawn management techniques, selective tree pruning to allow more sun or choose plants that grow well in shade. Any open areas in lawns or gardens invite weeds so use mulch or other ground covers to help fill in the areas.

Success in controlling creeping Charlie is in managing the original plant before it sets seed through hoeing, hand removal, smothering with mulches and/or herbicides. With hand pulling try to remove as much of the root as possible and be vigilant. Or you can begin to think of Charlie as a nice green ground cover.

What about borax to control creeping Charlie? Sodium tetraborate (borax) is a naturally occurring mineral, and is sold at the local market in the laundry soap aisle as 20-Mule Team Borax. Any advantages with Borax seem to be outweighed by its disadvantages. Limited research has shown inconsistent results. Studies at Iowa State University showed that Borax reduced creeping Charlie infestation in turfgrass, but results were weather-dependent and it caused stunting and yellowing injury in turf and other plants.

Borax contains boron, which plants need in very small quantities for healthy growth. However, larger quantities can be toxic. Creeping Charlie is extremely sensitive to boron. Another problem is boron does not break down as conventional weed killers do, so repeated or excessive applications can result in bare areas where no vegetation can grow.

One final reason not to use borax is that it is not a registered pesticide. Although borax may sound like a "natural" weed-control method, even natural products can harm children and pets. Registered pesticides have been studied extensively and come with labels that tell you how to protect yourself and others. The borax box tells you how to wash your clothes.

You may still want to try it so here is the recipe for Borax control of creeping Charlie in bluegrass. To treat 1,000 square feet use 10 oz of Twenty Mule Team Borax. Dissolve in 4 oz. of warm water then dilute that mixture into 2.5 gallons of water.

A better control method for creeping Charlie in your lawn is a postemergence broadleaf weed killer containing dicamba often found mixed with other weed killers, 2,4-D and mecoprop or MCPP in combination products (Trimec, Three Way Lawn Weed Killer, etc.) A second application later in the season according to label direction can provide additional control.

Remember herbicides can injure desirable plants through application or drift if not used properly. With any pesticide, always read and follow label directions. Herbicide applications work best when weeds are actively growing. Creeping Charlie is very susceptible to herbicides when it is in flower which is right now!

Regardless of the type of material applied (broadleaf herbicide or borax), the key to successful control of ground ivy is proper application. Once the ground ivy has been effectively controlled and a healthy lawn reestablished, the home gardener needs to use good mowing, fertilization, watering, and cultivation practices to maintain a dense, healthy, competitive stand of turfgrass which should help discourage future visits from Charlie.

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