Farm Views

The value of composting

Living on the farm or an acreage provides an excellent opportunity to get into composting and to gain the benefits of the composted material on your land. Regardless of the size of your rural establishment, you are bound to have an abundance of vegetation and other raw materials that form a good compost mixture. Recent environmental concerns has placed increased emphasis on disposal methods of all types of waste and previous practices, such as burning or dumping, are no longer acceptable. Composting is one of the most effective management tools one can utilize to dispose of discarded organic materials.

If you have never established a composting facility the time to start is now. Even though it is the end of the growing season, there are massive amounts of residue and other waste that needs to be eliminated from around the farmstead and garden. Leaves, dead grass and even tree limbs may be ground, chipped or just placed whole into a compost pile. Animal manure is another waste that can be turned into safer and more valuable additive to the soil. Properly stored and composted manure can make a valuable contribution to cropping and pasture management programs. Composting animal waste and bedding before spreading it on fields reduces the chance of pollution. Properly composted material will reach temperatures between 85 and 135 degrees F. After three days at temperatures of 130 degrees, many parasites, pathogenic bacteria and weed seeds will be destroyed. Also, composting stall waste for one or two months, reduces the volume of waste 40 to 70 percent and this means less work.

But, remember, it is not all that simple because composting is somewhat of a science and you have to know what you are doing to turn waste into a beneficial product for your soil. So the first step, if you lack experience and information on composting, is to learn the tricks of the trade. That may mean reading all the information you can gather on composting, taking instructions on procedures to follow and building the facilities to meet the needs of your own project. There are actually a lot of opportunities to learn about composting from a multitude of sources such as publications, construction guides and operations handbooks. Cooperative extension offers these educational materials in addition to workshops and demonstrations. Also recycling organizations hold conferences and seminars to share knowledge and experience of successful composting operations from across the country.

As mentioned earlier, the real benefit derived from composting, besides proper recycling of organic wastes, is the gains in soil fertility when properly composted organic material is returned to the land. All composted waste material has nutrient value for the soil and it provides organic matter which improves the structure of that soil and, in the end, its productivity. (WS)

October is the best time to treat hard to control pasture weeds

Leafy spurge

Leafy spurge is probably the worst weed we have in terms of being hard to kill and potential damage to pastures. Leafy spurge is a persistent, deep-rooted perennial which reproduces by both seeds and roots. It is found primarily on untilled land and is a noxious weed in Nebraska.

The plants will grow two to three feet high with many long, narrow leaves on the main stem. The top of the plant has specialized leaves called bracts which looks like a clover leaflet as opposed to the linear lower down on the plant. These bracts turn yellow in the spring and are frequently mistaken for flowers. The true flowers, which appear in late May, are small and not very showy. Being a spurge, the plant has a white milky sap that can be used to help identify it from other weeds.

Because leafy spurge spreads by rhizomes, as well as seeds, it tends to grow in very dense clumps which get bigger with each passing year. Not only does it tend to crowd out other forage plants, the spurge is mildly poisonous to cattle. It is rarely fatal but it does make the animal sick and they soon learn to avoid grazing near it. Therefore, the carrying capacity of pastures are essentially destroyed wherever leafy spurge is growing. For more information on how to identify leafy spurge contact Lancaster County Extension office for NebGuide G834.

Musk thistle

We have been making a little headway on musk thistle in recent years through the introduction of biological controls, mainly a weevil that feeds on the seed in the head and other insects that attack the plant directly.

In spite of the biological help we are receiving, musk thistle continues to be a big problem in pastures and along roadsides. Unlike leafy spurge, which is a perennial, musk thistle is primarily a biennial, but may act as a winter annual or, less frequently, as an annual. It is a prolific seed producer as one plant can produce as many as 20,000 seeds.

The best time to control many perennial weeds is in the fall. This is because as the weed begins the “dormant” stage of its life cycle, nutrients from the summer’s top growth are translocated into the root system. When this occurs, herbicides that have been applied this fall can actively move with the nutrients into the root system. Besides leafy spurge and musk thistle; Canada thistle, Russian knapweed, field bindweed and many other perennial weeds are all most effectively treated at this time.

The most effective herbicides for controlling these perennial weeds include Tordon or a combination of 2,4-D and Tordon. Banvel and Roundup combinations with 2,4-D are useful on Canada thistle and field bindweed. Ally at 0.1 ounce and Curtail at 2-4 pints per acre also can be used for Canada thistle control. For leafy spurge, Tordon seems to work well, but even with rates of 2-4 quarts per acre, repeat applications may be required over several years to bring the patches under control. Plateau is now cleared for use on the most sensitive grazing lands including mixed pastures and shelterbelts (see related article at bottom of page). Applications of Plateau herbicide provide long-term, consistent–95% or better–control of leafy spurge and reduces the total herbicide load on the environment.

As always, care should be taken to avoid spray drift when using any of these products, especially when used near valuable trees, water sources and other environmentally sensitive areas such as vineyards. Be sure to read and follow the label directions for correct application, amounts and methods. Tordon use for perennial weeds is limited to non-crop areas. (TD)

Disclaimer: Use of trade names is for clarity only and not as an endorsement of products mentioned.

Plateau herbicide cleared for use in Nebraska

In the ongoing effort to control leafy spurge, Nebraska has been granted an emergency exemption to use the herbicide Plateau to fight the damaging weed. The exemption is effective August 1, 1999 through July 1, 2000 on rangelands and pastures, as well as, land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program.

Nebraska Department of Agriculture petitioned for the exemption, because Plateau is the first herbicide that provides consistent, long-term control of leafy spurge and can be used in environmentally sensitive areas, such as near trees, along streams or bodies of water, on low-lying areas and in mixed pastures. Research trials conducted by the University of Nebraska and published by USDA, show that Plateau herbicide is a highly effective herbicide against leafy spurge. Plateau herbicide is known to also control other weeds such as field bindweed, thistles, crabgrass, downey brome and nut sedge.

For the control of leafy spurge, Plateau herbicide should be applied in accordance with the use directions provided in the special weed control section of the leaflet label. A single application may be made in the fall at a maximum rate of 12 fluid ounces per acre, or 8 fluid ounces may be applied in the fall, followed by 4 fluid ounces in the spring. Applications in the fall are most effective if accomplished before the first freeze. Be sure to follow specific label instructions in any case. (WS)

Grain storage information on the web

Low export demand and tight commercial storage space, combined with a better than normal yield for many dryland crops in eastern Nebraska, has resulted in grain stocks that exceed the available storage space in some areas. Even where on-farm storage is available, grain may need to be held on the farm longer than usual until grain can be pushed through the “pipeline” and on to domestic and foreign markets. This grain must be kept in good condition, free of molds, insect damage, etc.

The University of Nebraska has a large number of NebGuides and extension circulars on grain storage, aeration, drying and insect management. In addition, extension specialists have responded to grain storage shortages by developing a number of information sheets on grain storage dealing with converting existing structures to hold grain, piling grain outside as a last resort, engineering aeration systems, calculating bushels in non-standard grain storage situation, etc.

I have created a web page containing all of the available grain storage information from the University of Nebraska, as well as selected publications from other mid-western universities. It can be found on the Lancaster County Extension Nebraska Production Agriculture web pages under Crops. Most of this information can be downloaded by clicking on the reference indicated. The direct address of the Grain Storage page is: http://www.ianr.unl.edu/ianr/lanco/ag/crops/storage.htm (TD)

A REMINDER FOR INTERNET USERS:

Lancaster County Extension Office has a new, shorter home page address: www.lanco.unl.edu

Some shortcuts:

www.lanco.unl.edu/food	**www.lanco.unl.edu/hort**
www.lanco.unl.edu/ag	**www.lanco.unl.edu/family**
www.lanco.unl.edu/enviro	**www.lanco.unl.edu/4h**
www.lanco.unl.edu/nebline	**www.lanco.unl.edu/contact**