

Ask a Master Gardener

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Cleavers

Q: Can you help me identify a weed that is starting to take over a few of my flower beds? It is light green with small white flowers, and seems to cling to everything. It even sticks to my gloves when I try to pull it up. Susan V.

A: Thank you for sending a photo of the offending weed. If you cannot bring a fresh sample to the Extension office, a picture really helps when Master Gardeners are asked to identify a plant.

The weed that has decided to set-up residence in your landscape goes by many common names: cleavers, stickywilly, bedstraw, goose-grass, and sometimes Velcro plant. The common name bedstraw comes from its use as bed stuffing before we modern folks had inner spring, Sleep Number, and Memory Foam mattresses. The goose-grass name is because apparently geese love to snack on the plant. The weed's Latin name is *Galium aparine*. The species name "aparine" is very suitable as it means "to seize," which as you have found out is exactly what this plant does to anyone or anything that it touches. Small, downward-curved prickles cover both the stem and leaves and are responsible for its clinging nature. As the plant grows, the stems can reach seven to 30 inches in length and then begin to form mats.

Another member of the *Galium* group might be more familiar to you. Sweet Woodruff, *Galium odoratum*, is often used as a ground cover in shady gardens. The leaves and flowers have a pleasant fragrance and are used in potpourris, and are also used to flavor beer and wine. However, Sweet Woodruff does have a reputation for spreading too much and becoming invasive.

Now, what do you do about your problem weed? Unfortunately, weeds in this family are not preferred deer forage, so they will not be taking care of your problem. Assuming you don't have any geese that would love to have it for dinner, you really need to attack this offender quickly. Once it has flowered, the seeds form quickly. Since it is an annual, the best thing to do is to pull every bit of the weed up so that the seed will not be dispersed and come back to visit in even greater quantities next year. Individual plants typically produce 100 to 400 seeds. Once mature, the seeds will cling to any animal or material and you will find even more cleavers popping up next year throughout your landscape.

If *Galium aparine* has gone to seed, do the best you can to dispose of the plant and its seed. Be vigilant next spring and pull it before it blooms. Use of a preemergent herbicide applied early enough will help keep seeds of spring weeds, such as cleavers, from germinating. The weeds that have already emerged are not controlled by a preemergent. Preemergence herbicides generally persist in the soil for two to four months. Installing and maintaining mulch such as pine bark nuggets or pine straw in your flower beds can reduce seedling emergence and ease the removal of plants that do become established.

If you have gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Volunteer at the UGA Cooperative Extension Carroll County office at 900 Newnan Road, Carrollton at 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu.