WEED 'N FEED PRODUCTS

may help produce lush lawns
but harm — or even kill —trees, shrubs

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Many homeowners are anxious to begin landscaping chores on their properties as winter transitions into spring.

Oftentimes, landowners in pursuit of the perfect lawn rely on a number of chemicals to help. Despite their best intentions, this could mean damage to trees and shrubs while costing a landowner both time and money.

An Old Standby

Weed 'n feed, sold under a variety of brands, can help with landscaping needs as long as precautions are taken with when and where it is applied around trees and shrubs. Weed 'n feed has fertilizer and herbicide in one product, marketed as saving the landowner time and money.

Most weed and feed products contain nitrogen fertilizer and MCPP (mecoprop) or Dicamba, or 2,4-D either alone or in combination.

MCPP or Dicamba, and 2,4-D can be absorbed through the leaves or taken up by the roots. Injury can occur to non-target shrubs if the products are applied during hot weather where they can volatilize or when applied over the root zone.

Some weed and feed products can contain preemergent herbicides, which keep weed seeds from germinating. These would be least likely to injure already established plants.

There can be unforeseen effects on trees and shrubs even when applied properly.

Multiple or frequent applications of weed 'n feed over a tree's root system can cause problems. A tree may be able to withstand an annual application without much harm; however, several applications can cause additional stress that can eventually kill a tree. Applications coinciding with spring leaf-out or other stressors such as drought can also threaten a tree's survival.

Root of the Problem

Roots grow down and outward as a tree grows and becomes established. A general rule of thumb is that a tree's drip line represents the extent of the root system in most trees. In other words, the tree's roots extend out as far as the canopy. When applied over the roots, weed 'n feed affects the fine feeder roots of the tree, often stressing the tree and causing yellowing of some of the leaves. Generally, multiple applications annually can result in tree mortality in as little as a year on smaller trees and two to three years on larger ones.

Dealing with Weeds

Landowners have several options to manage weeds in and around trees. Hand pulling and spot treating weeds at the right time (read the herbicide label) can have a more direct impact on weeds than broadcasting weed 'n feed over the entire tree's root systems.

There are also alternatives to growing grass under trees. Mulching is a common one. A 3 to 4-inch layer of mulch applied under a tree can help enhance the infiltration of moisture and air while preventing weeds from becoming established. Be sure to leave 2 to 3 inches around the base of a tree without much mulch to prevent any basal decay (rot).

Using low-water landscaping is another alternative to large areas of turf. While labor-intensive initially, low-water landscaping can reduce lawn care efforts.

Weed 'n Feed and Me?

So, should you use weed 'n feed on your lawn? That is up to you. Following the directions on the product bag and applying at the right time and quantity while avoiding tree and shrub roots can prevent weeds and provide for lawn nutritional needs. Landscaped areas with numerous trees and shrubs may not be the best areas to broadcast weed 'n feed when more precise spot treatment for weeds will do the job.

Stop further application if you have already applied weed 'n feed over root systems of trees and shrubs in the growing season. You will want to begin watering the areas over the affected roots thoroughly in an attempt to dilute the chemical. Try watering three times a week for several weeks to help flush the chemical from the root zone.

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