

Japanese Stiltgrass Revisited

By Susan Camp

Several years ago, I noticed a new, grassy weed growing among a patch of Stokes asters that I had transplanted from a friend's garden. After a little research, I discovered that my new tenant was Japanese stiltgrass (*Microstegium vimenium*). Very soon, the little pest had migrated to other beds, and my attempts to eradicate it began.

I haven't been entirely successful in my endeavors, but I have managed to keep the stiltgrass in check. Sadly, that is not the case everywhere in Gloucester County. I see broad swaths of the stuff growing along the edges of woods, infiltrating lawns and fields, and even sprouting up through patches of moss in shaded spots.

I wrote a "Gardening Corner" column about Japanese stiltgrass in 2019, but I think it is time to revisit the topic and ask all of you to keep a watchful eye on the spread of this invasive, exotic weed.

Japanese stiltgrass was accidentally introduced into Tennessee in 1919 as dried packing material in a shipment of porcelain from China. Stiltgrass is now found in at least 26 states, 18 of which range along the eastern half of the country. In Virginia, stiltgrass is found from the coast to the mountains.

M. vimenium is a vigorous, fast-growing annual that will live in full sun, which it prefers, or shade and in wet or dry soil. It is found in fields, meadows, woodlands, on hiking trails, and on disturbed land near power lines and railroad tracks. On the Middle Peninsula, stiltgrass also grows in wetlands and along creek and stream banks. Wherever Japanese stiltgrass sprouts, it forms a heavy mat that crowds out and smothers native vegetation, destroying food sources and habitat for native animals, birds, and insects as it spreads.

Japanese stiltgrass is an attractive bright green plant that grows from 3 or 4 inches to 4 feet in height. Smooth, wiry stems bear 2 to 4-inch lance-shaped leaves that grow along the stems at alternate intervals and resemble bamboo. Each leaf is bisected by a main vein covered with silvery hairs that reflect light. The vein has been compared to a "slug trail." Stiltgrass is easy to pull from the ground. If you use your imagination, the roots look like tiny stilts.

Stiltgrass roots at the leaf nodes, spreading quickly to cover any open area. The weed produces a chemical that changes soil chemistry and prevents other plants from thriving. Between August and October, inconspicuous flowers, which are hidden by the leaf sheaths, form on the stems. The flowers self-pollinate and set seeds that ripen between August and December and germinate between April and June. The tiny seeds are dispersed by water, animals, and humans. The seeds remain viable for up to seven years, although the percentage of seeds capable of germination decreases after two to three years.

Hand weeding is the best method to remove small patches of the weeds. Mow larger areas of stiltgrass in August or September before it flowers with the mower blade set low enough to scrape the ground. You can use a string trimmer held at an angle that will let the string cut ¼ inch into the ground. The grass dries and forms thick mats in winter that can be raked up. Don't place cuttings in the compost bin.

The application of chemical herbicides should be reserved for large infestations of Japanese stiltgrass and used as a last resort. A grass-selective herbicide is more effective than a non-selective chemical and permits the return of more native plants. Several articles recommend hiring a professional to apply the herbicide.

Read the University of Maryland Extension Home and Garden Information Center publication "Japanese Stiltgrass" for basic information on growth habit and identification. The Penn State Extension article "Controlling Japanese Stiltgrass in Your Garden" offers helpful suggestions for management of this aggressive plant. The Blue Ridge Partnership for Invasive Species Management article at www.blueridgeprism.org "Insidious & Formidable Invasive Japanese Stiltgrass" offers comprehensive information on growth, identification, and eradication.

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