



## **Don't let your Lawncare Hurt the Rest of Your Garden**

By Marie Woodward, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Gardeners are always on the lookout for trouble. Whether it's from aphids, beetles or other insects that are eating plants, or diseases in the form of fungus, mildew or bacteria that are preying on our prize annuals, perennials, trees or shrubs, gardeners stand vigil, ready to intervene before things get out of hand. But there is one more thing gardeners should be on the lookout for. It's not a pest or disease. It's damage from lawn herbicides.

Herbicides commonly used to kill broadleaf weeds in lawns can have an unexpected and harmful effect on non-targeted plants. Typically, they will not kill plants because the toxicity of herbicide drift is usually low. However, herbicide drift can cause disfigurement, especially in newer growth. This is commonly seen as one or more of the following symptoms: stems that flatten, twist or corkscrew; or leaves that show abnormal shapes, sizes and textures. In addition, leaf veins may become yellow or red. In severe cases, when herbicides are directly sprayed on plants, the toxicity increases and plants may become brown and die. Tomatoes and grapes are especially susceptible to herbicide damage and, like the canary in the coal mine, they can be used as an indicator of herbicide exposure.



Herbicide damage to tomato. Photo by Anne Harmon

Herbicide use in lawns today is common. Many homeowners use weed killers mixed with fertilizer in the form of a "weed and feed" treatment as part of an annual lawn care program.

They also use herbicides as a spot treatment for unwanted weeds in the lawn or on walkways. If these products are applied too close to vegetables or other plants and the temperature is above 90 degrees, or if the wind velocity is above 5 mph, herbicides can drift from targeted to non-targeted areas. Under certain conditions, some herbicides become gases that can drift several hours after application.

To avoid herbicide damage, it's important to read the herbicide labels *carefully* and follow directions *exactly*. To safeguard against herbicide drift, apply when there is as little wind as possible, (<5 mph) and when temperatures are cooler (to reduce gas emissions). Herbicides are best used at low pressure to minimize production of fine mists.

If you notice a non-targeted plant that shows signs of herbicide damage, don't panic. The degree of toxicity a plant is exposed to through herbicide drift is usually too little to kill it. Although there is nothing you can do to repair damage from herbicide drift, new growth may show distortion and discoloration, but subsequent growth will be normal. It is best to provide normal care to the damaged plant.

The *best* defense against herbicide damage is to avoid using herbicides on your lawn. Thick vigorous grass will out-compete weeds for moisture, light and soil nutrients. Look for and use disease resistant turfgrass seed when planting or renovating. Set the mower blades so they will cut the grass two to three inches tall. Also, don't remove more than 30-40% of the blade at one time. It is important to water correctly. Lawns only need one inch of water per week. To help measure the correct water amount, take an empty 7 oz tuna can and place it in the lawn when watering. When the can is full, the lawn has enough water for the week. In addition, monitor your lawn visually for insect pests or abnormalities to catch them before they can cause extensive damage. Lastly, fertilize correctly. Read fertilizer labels and follow directions for proper application.

Great lawns and great plants *can* live together, when gardeners like us treat them with care, and of course, love.

For questions about weed control or for other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or [www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu](http://www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu) or your local Cooperative Extension Center.