

Weed watch: Spiny amaranth

By Andy Luke, regional agronomy specialist

Spiny amaranth, or spiny pigweed, is a weed that has been showing up in greater numbers in Missouri pastures recently. As its name suggests, the weed has two spines at each node, making cattle and other livestock avoid the plant while grazing. If allowed to become established in a pasture, it is extremely difficult to eliminate this weed.

Reaching heights of up to 5 feet, spiny amaranth has a smooth, red stem and egg-shaped leaves on long petioles. At the base of each petiole are a pair of spines, with seedheads occurring at the ends of stems and in small clusters where the petioles meet the stem. The overall appearance of spiny amaranth closely resembles other species in the pigweed family, such as common waterhemp or redroot pigweed. The spines at the base of the leaf petioles will help distinguish this plant from others.

Like other pigweeds, spiny amaranth is a summer annual weed that thrives in Missouri's hot summers. Infestations generally begin after a pasture has been heavily grazed and there is very little grass for the pigweed species to compete with. Once established, spiny amaranth tends to spread due to its prolific seed production. Each plant can produce over 110,000 seeds, and the tiny seeds are often spread through hay, water or animal manure.

Spiny amaranth control is best achieved by maintaining a healthy pasture, as infestations are rare in healthy, vigorous pastures. However, if it is already present in your fields, several control options do exist. Growth regulator herbicides such as dicamba or picloram are effective at controlling spiny amaranth, but will also injure or kill any legumes in the pasture. Mowing before the plant reaches maturity can suppress seed production, but even damaged plants may recover and produce seeds. Multiple mowing applications may be required to completely control the weed. Although it is not practical for large infestations, hand removal is also an effective control measure. While the sharp spines make this difficult, removing and burning small patches of spiny amaranth before they reach maturity can prevent the weed from spreading.

If you have questions on how to identify or control spiny amaranth, contact Andy Luke at (660)-425-6434, or call your local University of Missouri Extension center.

