Weed of the Month (June 2010)

Carolina Geranium

The genus name Geranium is an old Greek name derived from the word for “crane.” The long beak of the fruit was thought to resemble the beak of that bird.

Carolina geranium (Geranium carolinianum) is considered a weed by most folks and is often found in disturbed areas such as cultivated fields and pastures throughout the United States, British Columbia, Ontario, the West Indies and Mexico. While not a severe weed pest in most situations, Carolina geranium can be weed problem in lawns and especially in ornamental and perennial beds.

This weed is a low sprawling, cool season annual in our growing area (it is reported to be a warm season annual and a biennial in other locations). It can attain a height of 6 to 28+ inches and forms from a large tap root.

Carolina geranium can be easily identified by its ovoid to kidney-shaped leaves that are deeply lobed. The plant has multiple stems arising from the base and an overall circular growth pattern from the center. The stems are erect to ascending, herbaceous, of a brown to reddish color, and are widely branching and densely glandular (hairy).

Carolina geranium can have leaves at the base and on the stem which may be either opposite or alternately arranged. Leaves are attached to stems on noticeably long petioles. Flower color ranges from white to pink and each flower has 5 petals. Flowers are less than ¼ inch wide and form in clusters.

In the Texas Upper Gulf Coast region, flowering typically occurs from March to May and each flower usually produces 5 seeds enclosed in a 5-lobed capsule with a long central beak, similar to a stork’s beak. When mature, the capsule springs open from the base and the five divisions curve upward dispersing seeds a considerable distance.

Seeds measure about 0.08 inches (2mm) long and are prominently of a rectangular pattern and oblong in shape. Seeds are reported to have astringent, diuretic, and nephritic properties. In west Texas, the leaves are food for white-tailed deer, cattle, and Rio Grande turkeys, while the seeds are consumed by mourning doves and rodents.

Control of this plant is best deployed in the fall or spring, depending when it is actively growing. If the infestation level is low, hand pulling or digging may be effective if performed diligently, and only if the tap root is totally extracted. Removal should be performed prior to flower and seed formation! Two-, three-, and four-way broadleaf postemergent herbicides are effective for severe infestations. Remember that the first line of defense against weeds is following good turf management practices to promote a dense competitive stand of turfgrass.