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Rochester Sentinel Article

A Tale of Two Weeds



Picture: on the left, a stunted giant ragweed and on the right, pigweed growing in a corn field.

Along the edge of my cornfield grows two weeds of separate species side by side just like old buddies, but they are not buddies, they are weeds! They are competing with the corn and each other for sunlight, water and nutrients. Around them are other weeds of their species that also want what makes them grow. One of these is giant ragweed or what we called horseweed. Given the right spot, they will grow taller than a horse. They like the rich moist organic soils in the bottomlands and that is where they can easily be tall enough to hide a tractor in a good year.

The seeds they produce are much larger than most weed seeds and they have a type of point on the top that resemble a crown. One fall, I was rabbit hunting through a patch of giant ragweed and quite a large covey of quails kicked out. The seed is preferred and very nutritious for quail. Cows will eat on the plant. They will not want the big thick stalks, but allow cattle to graze a recently combined field of corn and they will clean up the giant ragweed. One interesting fact about giant ragweed seed, is that it is not very persistent in the soil and in two years most of it will be destroyed.

So much for the virtues of ragweed because as a weed, one plant per 10 square feet can reduce soybean yield by 52% and corn yield by 55%. It can compete.

The other plant, touching the giant ragweed in my field was pigweed. The pigweed family of plants are some of the nastiest weeds in the area for crop farmers. They include redroot pigweed (our common weed), palmer amaranth, waterhemp and spiny pigweed. These can all produce a lot of seed that last for decades in the soil. One palmer amaranth plant can produce a million seeds. They also can be resistant to a variety of common herbicides.

Pigweed can be deadly to livestock. They contain two poisons. The first, always present, is called oxalates. They can cause kidney damage and death of the animal. It generally takes a quantity of weeds over time to be deadly. So, a few weeds in a pasture is not alarming, but a hog lot full of them can be deadly to their namesake. I remember the first time I went to the Purdue Animal Disease and Diagnostic Lab, there lying on the table was a large pig, dead from pigweed poisoning.

The second problem is nitrate poisoning. Nitrate poisoning can occur from many crops but it is usually precipitated by drought conditions that allow soil nitrogen to accumulate in the plant especially after a rain. It is hard to predict when it will occur and is generally an issue in cattle, sheep and goats. Low

levels of nitrogen fertilizer and keeping things watered will help prevent this problem. Unfortunately, we don't always have the irrigation option.

Giant ragweed and pigweed growing side by side is robbing my corn yield, but one has an even greater potential to take my animals away from me. Just because it is named pigweed, does mean it good for pigs.

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