

Farmers battle 'bankruptcy grass'



Johnsongrass rhizomes can grow up to 300 feet in a month, robbing the crop of moisture and nutrients, according to the USDA.

LANCASTER — Around 1830, when Johnsongrass first found its way into the United States from the Mediterranean farmers viewed it as an invaluable aid to their farming operations.

Livestock producers cultivated it as a hardy forage crop for protein. In areas where the soil was sandy and overworked, farmers sowed it in hopes the fast-growing root system would hold onto their rapidly eroding land.

But, by 1900 farmers had changed their tune. After wide distribution as hay for cavalry horses during the Civil War, Johnsongrass ran rampant in field crops. This problem led to the first appropriation of federal funds for weed control, and, in 1902, issuance of the first report about clearing fields of Johnsongrass.

Today, although it is still sown as forage and cut and baled for hay in parts of Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi, most farmers are on the lookout for a way to control this noxious perennial grass in row crops.

Ranked as one of the world's ten worst weeds by the Weed Science Society of America, Johnsongrass infests some 10 million acres nationwide in an area stretching

from Texas to Missouri and from New York State to California. It is most heavily concentrated in the cotton and soybean producing states of the south, where it is known as "bankruptcy grass."

Although Johnsongrass is not as common in the northeastern states of Pennsylvania and New York, agronomists and farmers are fully aware of the weed's potential for destruction, and understand that even a minor infestation can create yield reductions and harvesting difficulties.

"Johnsongrass is a relatively minor problem in the state of Pennsylvania, but it's crucial to contain it," warns Nathan L. Hartwig, associate professor of weed science at Penn State. "If you don't do something about it, it doesn't take long for it to become a more severe problem."

Hartwig estimates that 2½ percent — 50,000 acres — of the state's total 1½ million corn acres were infested with Johnsongrass according to 1977 statistics. Where infestations were solid, crop yields had been reduced by 100 percent, he says. Currently, Johnsongrass flushes are predominately in the southeastern region of the state and the Susquehanna River Valley.

In New York, the Johnsongrass problem is characterized as "limited to modest" by W.B. Duke, agronomist at Cornell University. Heaviest concentrations are found in the central and southern portions of the state. Although yield losses recorded in New York have so far been negligible, the potential for crop reduction is 50 percent, according to Duke.

"More importantly, Johnsongrass has a bad effect on harvest ability," says Duke. "It can make it impossible to get harvesting equipment through a field."

While Duke reiterates there has been no great overall loss, he concedes that farmers must stop the spread of any infestation, because the seedlings are capable of spreading and propagating — eventually leading to a full-scale problem.

Johnsongrass poses such a difficult control problem because of its many methods of propagation. It boasts one of the hardest, fastest-growing rhizome systems of any weed, with a single plant capable of producing 300 feet of new growth in a month.

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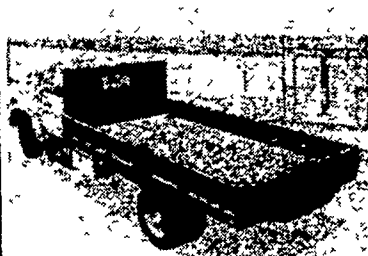
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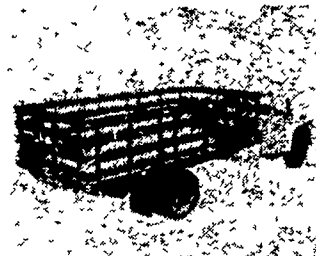
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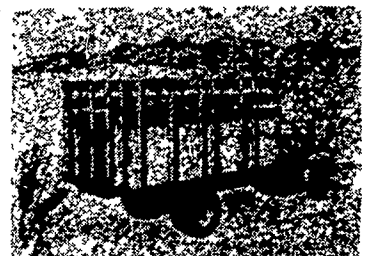
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