

Bur Buttercup: Identification and Control

Over the last several years, a new weed has invaded our yards and gardens. It is called bur buttercup. It germinates in late winter, forms flowers a few weeks later, produces seeds, and dies by late spring. It has spread rapidly across the arid western United States and is especially problematic in sunny areas with disturbed or bare soil, where it commonly appears in vegetable gardens, flowerbeds, gravel driveways, thin or poorly maintained lawns, and along sidewalks or pavement cracks. One reason we notice are the prickly seedheads, which can each contain up to 80 seeds. They stick in your hands when you work in the soil, they get into your feet, animal fur, and clothing.

The bur seed head is not the only problem. This weed is dangerous because all parts of the plant, including the seeds, are poisonous to livestock, pets, and humans. Ingestion or contact can cause stomach irritation, blistering, and severe illness, making early identification and control critical.

Bur buttercup is from Eurasia and is now widespread across much of the western U.S. Plants are small, typically growing 2 to 5 inches tall. They have finely divided, feathery leaves near the base that resemble a bird's foot. The plant thrives in cool conditions and is frost-tolerant.

Bur buttercup is easiest to manage before flowering and seed production. In small areas, non-chemical methods can be very effective, such as hand-pulling, hoeing, or shallow cultivation, which can be done as soon as the soil can be worked in early spring. Remember, plants must be removed before seeds form.

Weed torches can be effective in gravel or soil if the area is free of debris that could accidentally catch fire. When using a torch, plants only need to be wilted, not burned completely. Do not use torches near bark mulch or flammable materials.

Mulching bare soil with 3–4 inches of bark mulch, grass clippings, or rock helps prevent germination of new plants. Organic mulches like bark mulch should be refreshed with an inch of new bark annually, as they decompose over time. Additionally, weeds can establish on decomposing material.

Soil solarization is another option. It involves covering soil with clear plastic from late spring through late summer to kill weed seeds and roots up to 6 inches deep.

Cover crops planted in late summer or early fall in open areas can suppress weed establishment in early spring when managed properly.

Herbicide Options

Herbicides are most effective when applied before or during flowering. Once seeds have formed, spraying provides little benefit. Organic herbicides will likely scorch newly germinated plants. Conventional herbicides containing 2,4-D and dicamba provide control when used on label-approved sites, such as lawns. Glyphosate can be used in other areas. Always read and follow label directions carefully, and confirm the product is approved for both the site and the weeds present.



Bur Buttercup plant and seed head.