

Fall's the way to go on thistles, leafy spurge.

Thirty years ago, Timothy Perrin started renting some truly golden acres — unfortunately, the golden hue was a massive leafy spurge infestation. The sandy soils of his owned and leased pastures near Cherokee, Iowa, are excellent media for the infamous invader.

“Leafy spurge was solid when we started renting,” Perrin says. “But we needed the pasture.”

Perrin and his family run 150 Angus/Gelbvieh-cross cattle on 500 acres of pasture and timber. They also raise 700 acres of row crops and operate a mink farm. Efficiency is Perrin’s mantra. That’s why, after years spent working to dial in the best treatment plan possible, he opts for fall weed control.

“I used to spray in the spring, but I get a better kill on the weeds I’m targeting in the fall,” Perrin says.

Besides leafy spurge, Perrin also battles musk thistle and common mullein. Biennial and perennial species make excellent targets for fall treatment. Cooler fall weather often accompanied by increased rainfall sparks regrowth and germinates new seedlings. The lush growth is especially susceptible to herbicides.

Through the years, Perrin also refined his product choices. He initially tried 2,4-D on leafy spurge with limited results. He found that he could knock back the spurge for a short period during the growing season only to watch it come back as strong as ever. He tried other products, too, and eventually found one that worked better than 2,4-D, but it also really dinged his grasses.

“We tried Plateau one year and almost killed our pasture,” Perrin recalls. “It did OK on the spurge, but the bluegrass didn’t

come back the next year.” That released a serious common mullein infestation.

Only after switching to Tordon® 22K herbicide for leafy spurge did things begin to turn around.

“We’ve seen the biggest progress in our control program during the last three years,” Perrin says. “We switched from 2,4-D to Tordon 22K. Tordon 22K does a better job on leafy spurge and it’s easy on the grass. Where we use it, the bluegrass and brome really fill in.”

Areas 40 percent to 50 percent covered in leafy spurge now are down to around 5 percent coverage. He’s made some significant headway on musk thistle, too.

“In one of my rented pastures, we had areas that were solid musk thistle,” Perrin notes. “The owner said we’d never get rid of it, but it’s pure grass now.”

Perrin spot-treats musk thistle and common mullein in the fall. And he’s not about to let thistles and leafy spurge confined to wooded areas get loose. He’s worked to establish beneficial beetles aimed at keeping invasives in check in impossible-to-treat areas.

Strategically timed treatments teamed with the right product in a multipronged approach have yielded results. Perrin says he’s made even more headway in grass production during recent years by focusing more of his pasture investments on weed control and less on fertilizer.

“I probably have twice the carrying capacity now, and I think I can see the end of leafy spurge,” Perrin says. But he’s not planning to let up on his efforts anytime soon. “If you let maintenance slip for a year or two after you’ve been treating, you’ve really just wasted your time and money.”

Tough, perennial weeds require continued scouting and spot treatments long after the primary infestation is under control. Plants can sprout from large, remaining seedbanks or move in again from surrounding areas. Maintenance will help protect the time and money spent on eradicating a tough infestation. Changes in management also may be in order.

“We’ve cut down the number of cows we run and try to give pastures a break,” Perrin notes. “We’ll add more cattle in as our pastures stabilize, but we want to keep stocking rates at a level that maintains quality grass and keeps our herd in good shape.” ■

FALL TREATMENT RECOMMENDATIONS:

Rangeland, pastures, Conservation Reserve Program acres

Musk, plumeless, bull and other biennial thistles	3 to 5 fl. oz. Milestone® herbicide per acre 1.5 pts. ForeFront® R&P herbicide per acre
Canada thistle	5 to 7 fl. oz. Milestone per acre 2 to 2.6 pts. ForeFront R&P per acre
Leafy spurge	Broadcast: 2 pts. Tordon® 22K herbicide per acre Spot: 2 qts. Tordon 22K per acre
Field bindweed	1 to 2 pts. Tordon 22K plus 1 lb. 2,4-D per acre
Spotted and diffuse knapweed	5 to 7 fl. oz. Milestone per acre 2 to 2.6 pts. ForeFront R&P per acre
Sericea lespedeza	1½ to 2 pts. PastureGard® herbicide per acre
Russian knapweed and rush skeletonweed	5 to 7 fl. oz. Milestone per acre
Tall ironweed	2 to 2.6 pts. ForeFront R&P per acre 5 to 7 fl. oz. Milestone per acre

Careful grazing management helps Timothy Perrin keep plenty of forage under hoof.