

# Johnsongrass

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## Johnsongrass *Sorghum halepense* (L.) Pers.

Also known as: means-grass, guinea-grass, Aleppo millet-grass, [*Andropogon halapense* (L.) Brot.].

## Classification and Description

Johnsongrass, *Sorghum halepense* (L.) Pers., is a member of the grass or Poaceae family. Johnsongrass is a very troublesome weed, as it is capable of extensive seed production and can propagate from creeping, thick rhizomes. These characteristics help to make Johnsongrass a very prolific weed. Johnsongrass is sometimes mistaken for shattercane [*Sorghum bicolor* (L.) Moench]. The thick, coarse rhizomes of Johnsongrass set it apart from shattercane, which does not have this characteristic. Also, Johnsongrass typically has a more open seed head and narrower leaves than shattercane.

## Historical

Johnsongrass is a warm-season perennial grass that is native to the Mediterranean region. It was introduced into the U.S. in the early 1800s as a forage crop. By the end of the 19th century, Johnsongrass was growing throughout most of the United States. For most of the 1900s, Johnsongrass was a very severe weed problem in Tennessee. By the 1980s, postemergence graminicides greatly aided growers in managing this weed in soybeans and cotton. Later, several ALS-inhibiting herbicides were introduced that controlled Johnsongrass in corn. Starting in 1996 with the introduction of Roundup Ready® soybeans and a year later with Roundup Ready® cotton, glyphosate could be used to provide excellent control of Johnsongrass. Although Johnsongrass is still problematic in many agricultural fields, it is not considered to be as severe a pest as it was just a decade ago.



Rhizome Johnsongrass emerging with corn

## Interesting Facts

Johnsongrass can poison livestock if it has suffered from drought or an early frost, due to buildup of hydrocyanic (prussic) acid in the plant tissues. Rhizomes have been found more than 47 inches deep in cultivated soil, and 5-year-old seeds displayed 50 percent viability. A single Johnsongrass plant can produce 200-300 ft. of rhizomes in one month and 10 bushels of seed can be produced on one acre in a single growing season.

## Weed Status and Injury

Johnsongrass can be found across Tennessee in most agricultural fields, waste areas, roadsides and pastures. Though several herbicides are quite effective on Johnsongrass, often some regrowth will occur. This regrowth, though less competitive, can often produce enough biomass to lower crop yields and hinder harvest. Moreover, Johnsongrass is a primary overwintering reservoir for viral corn diseases. There are more than 20 species of aphids that can vector maize dwarf mosaic virus (MDMV) from Johnsongrass to corn.

## Management Considerations

Johnsongrass is still a prevalent problem in row-crop agriculture in Tennessee. Johnsongrass emerges from April through August. In-crop systemic herbicides can be very effective on Johnsongrass, though some regrowth probably will occur. Please refer to Extension PB 1580, **Weed Control Manual for Tennessee Row Crops**, for information about Johnsongrass control with specific herbicides.

## References

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