Giving Natural Weed Killer Another Try

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

Four years ago I tried a "natural weed killer" idea I saw online and didn't have much luck (FARM SHOW Vol. 39, Issue 4). But the idea keeps popping up so I decided to give it another try.

The recipe is 1 gal. vinegar, 1 1/2 cups Epsom salt and 2 Tbsp. Dawn dishwashing soap. Vinegar has acetic acid, a desiccant that draws moisture from the leaves. Salt is also a moisture-sucking desiccant that works on the roots. Soap helps the leaves absorb the spray and break down the waxy coating. The shiny look that soap leaves also makes it easier to know where you have sprayed.

Here's what I've learned the second time around:

• Plan to do more than one application. Even chemical herbicides often require multiple applications.

• Apply it on a hot, sunny day for the best results.

• Some folks use 1/2 cup of table salt instead of Epsom salt. That will affect the soil long term so it should only be used in areas where you don't ever want to grow anything. Salt may actually work better, because low doses of Epsom Salt are used by some gardeners to help plants grow.

Four years ago Dee Goerge tested a home-made weed killer without much luck. She recently gave it another try and learned a few things that helped.

• For large areas buy 30 percent white vinegar and dilute it; regular vinegar is just 5 percent. Concentrated vinegar is available online, starting at about $22/gal. Rinse out the sprayer after every use or it will corrode.

Robert McIntyre replaced the dinged-up hood on his Deere riding mower with a wooden dumping cargo box.

Mower Hood Replaced With Cargo Carrier

"The hood on my Deere LX 176 riding mower was dinged up – and new hoods are expensive - so I got the idea of replacing it with a dumping cargo box. It worked out great because that space on the tractor would otherwised be wasted," says Robert D. McIntyre, Nixa, Mo.

"I'm getting older so I use it all the time when puttering around to carry tools, bags of composted cow manure, and to pick up trash using a grabber tool when mowing. Every once in a while a grandkid will even ride in it, sitting in a seat I strap securely to the box.

"I removed the hood and made a frame out of angle iron and black iron pipe. It's held in place by 4 bolts and can be easily removed to mount a hood back in place. The box tilts up to service the engine or to dump cargo.

"I spent only about $25 for some angle iron and cedar boards to make the box."

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"I use the box all the time to carry tools, bags of composted cow manure, and to pick up trash using a grabber tool when mowing," says McIntyre.

"Shade balls" are 4-in. dia. black plastic balls that float on top of water in a tank, preventing evaporation.

Floating "Shade Balls" Proven To Save Water

Mitzi and Dink Miller are saving water and keeping tumbleweeds out of cow tanks, thanks to shade balls. The 4-in. black plastic balls cover the water surface, preventing evaporation and keeping tanks open in cold weather.

"A guy on our Roosevelt County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) board saw an article about them being used on big Los Angeles reservoirs to slow evaporation and wondered what they would do on stock tanks," says Mitzi, also a board member. "We decided to try some."

About the only difference between "cow balls", which were featured in FARM SHOW nearly 20 years ago (Vol. 25, No. 5), and today's shade balls is water ballast. Water in the balls keeps them floating on the surface even in windy conditions. Cows are also less likely to knock them out of the tank.

They got them from a U.S. supplier. The board tried them out on pairs of 7 1/2-ft. and 20-ft. dia. stock tanks, one with the balls and one without. The demonstration was carried out for about 3 years.

"It was amazing the lack of evaporation with shade balls on a tank," says Miller.

The 7 1/2-ft. dia. tank without the balls lost 10,767 gal. over the test period, while the tank with shade balls lost only 2,622 gal. The 20-ft. tank without balls lost 81,168 gal., while the one with shade balls lost only 19,771 gal. The shade ball tanks also had less ice formation.

That was good news for the Millers. They ranch in eastern New Mexico, where it can be hard for wells to supply cattle when a drought hits. They were sold on the concept.

"We've seen similar results to the district," says Miller. "We had less evaporation where we had shade balls. And when temperatures got down below freezing, we had to break ice in tanks without shade balls, but cattle were able to drink freely from tanks with them."

Other benefits Miller has seen include fewer birds around a shade ball-covered tank and less algae, as less dirt and trash get in the tank. They also reduce labor.

Water inside the balls weighs them down so they don't blow away.

"We have tumbleweeds in the winter and when the wind starts blowing, the tanks will fill up with them," she says. "They blow over the top of tanks with shade balls."

The only negative is the cost. The Roosevelt County SWCD has become a dealer for the shade balls as a way to keep costs down. The high-density polyethylene plastic balls cost about 60 cents each. To get the recommended surface density, an 8-ft. dia. tank requires about 500 shade balls. A 25-ft. dia. tank would require more than 4,900.

"They're a hard sell to ranchers, but they really ought to try them," says Miller.

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