



ACADEMIC WEED-WHACKERS

By Rob Zaleski

Editor's Note: This interesting article came from close to home. Rob Zaleski is a feature writer for The Capital Times here in Madison. He has also worked as a sports reporter and editor at The Capital Times and the Green Bay Daily News before that. This piece appeared in the weekend issue of The Capital Times for March 14-15, 1998. It appears with permission from Rob.

Some Wisconsin homeowners may find this hard to believe, but the quack grass that invades your finely manicured front lawn every summer is not considered the most cunning and despicable weed on this planet.

Not even close.

The absolute worst weed, according to retired UW agronomy professor LeRoy Holm, is a relentless, unmerciful villain known as purple nut sedge, which for centuries has plagued landowners in subtropical regions (including California and the southeastern United States) throughout the world.

Almost as bad is the bracken fern, a rapidly growing weed that's commonly found in England and, if left untended, will destroy acres upon acres of prime farmland in a matter of years.

"There's no way to control it," Holm points out. "Once you get it, your soil is ruined for life."

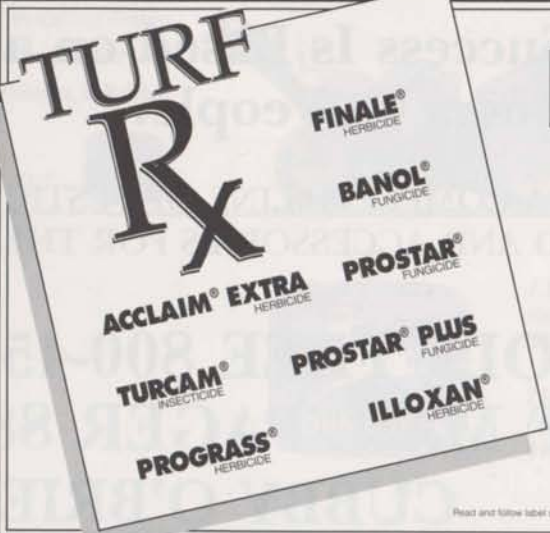
If anyone should know, it's Holm — the Sherlock Holmes of the weed world — who over the last 35 years has visited some 80 countries tracking down the Earth's nastiest weeds and, along the way, written three books on the subject.

The last of the trilogy, "World Weeds: Natural Histories and Distributions," was published last year and, much to Holm's shock, recently won the prestigious Association of American Book Publishers' 1997 biological sciences award.

Indeed, three weeks after the honor was announced, Holm, 80, is



Look familiar? That's quack grass, one of the most despised weeds in Wisconsin, that UW professor Jerry Doll is holding in the UW Greenhouse. Doll and retired UW professor LeRoy Holm (left) recently won a prestigious award for their book, "World Weeds." Holm's wife, Marian, and his son, Eric (not shown), provided major assistance.



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seated in a rocking chair in the living room of his Nakoma neighborhood home and says he's still dumbfounded over why the book was selected.

So is the book's co-author, UW agronomy professor Jerry Doll.

(Major contributors were Juan Pancho of the University of the Philippines; James Herberger, a former UW horticulture student; Holm's wife, Marian, who twice retyped the 1,150-page manuscript before it was submitted to the publisher, John Wiley & Sons, in New York; and Holm's son, Eric, who compiled all the book's intricate data on his basement computer.)

Naturally they were aware all along of the book's potential significance, says Doll, 54 — noting that it took 13 years to complete the project.

Controlling weeds has become a critical worldwide issue over the last half-century, he says — and will become even more critical as the world's exploding population gobbles up more and more valuable farmland over the next 50 years.

That's why, even now, it's crucial for communities like Madison to limit

urban sprawl — and to think about the long-term consequences of projects such as the proposed expansion of U.S. 12 to four lanes from Middleton to Sauk City.

"Once that land's gone," Doll says, "it's gone forever."

Nonetheless, the award "still blew our minds, he says, considering all the important books on biotechnology and related fields that are coming out practically every week.

"So we're intrigued," he says, grinning, "that a book that includes the word weeds in its title would even be in the running for an award like this — let alone the recipient of it."

To be sure, winning an award was the last thing on Holm's mind when he set out back in 1963 to find out exactly how many weeds existed and where they were located — which, he figured, was an absolute necessity if mankind were ever to succeed in eradicating the most noteworthy culprits.

The estimates at the time ranged anywhere from 50 to 50,000, says Holm, who began his quest in western Russia. "Now we know there are

about 200 weeds causing about 90 percent of the world's weed problems."

But, oh, what problems, he adds.

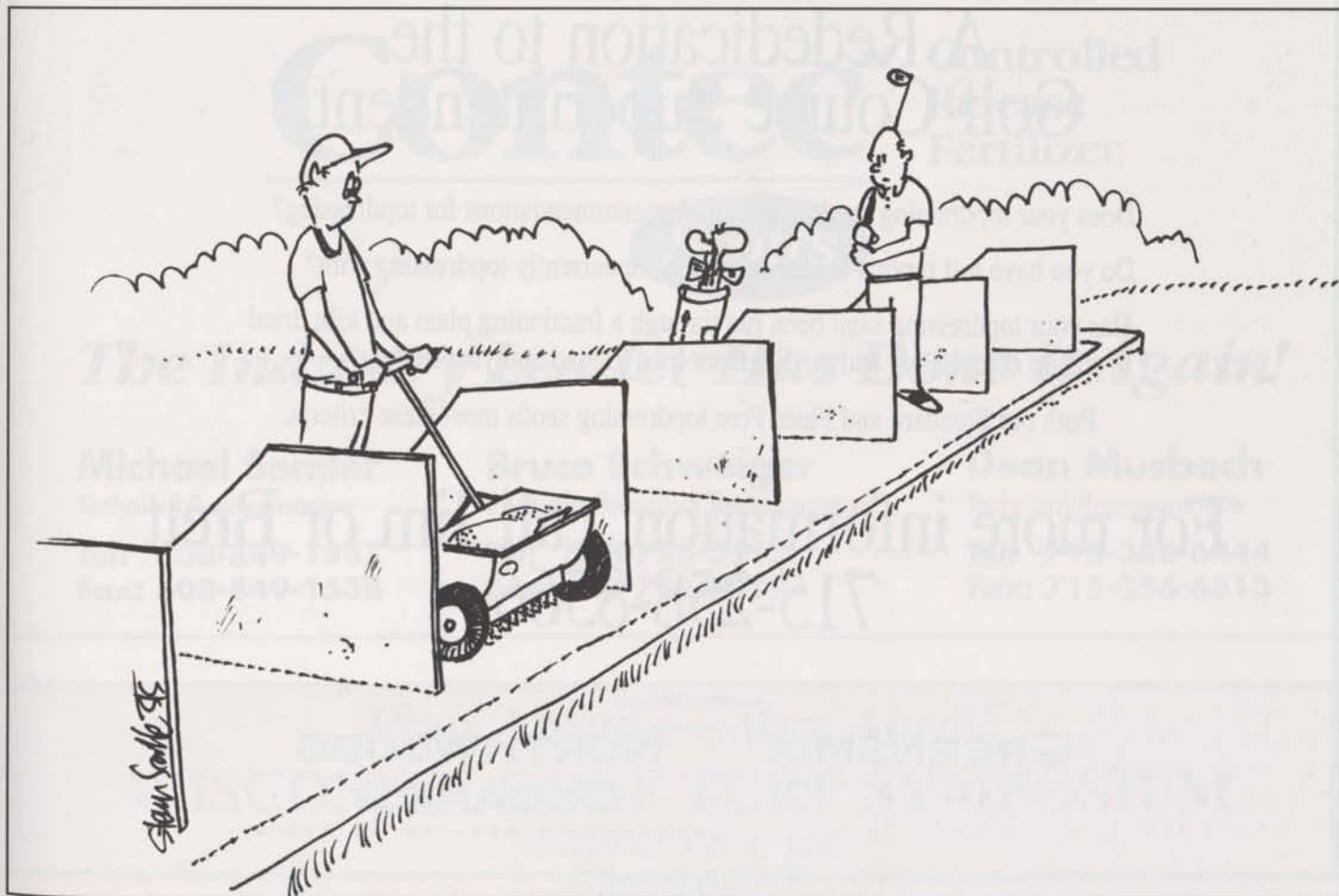
"I stood in more muddy drainage ditches and crops of all kinds than anyone I can think of," he says. "I found one area in India where the whole town was driven out by weeds. And I became convinced that the weeding of man's crops consumes more time and effort than any other single human task."

Rice, for example, remains the world's primary food crop, Holm says. Ninety-five percent is grown in Asia — and most of it is still weeded by hand.

"It's really tragic," he says. "It's so time consuming that kids aren't allowed to go to school. There's no time to build sewers or things like that. The people are just out there weeding all the time."

What's more, the worldwide cost of controlling weeds is staggering, Holm says — far eclipsing the amount spent on eradicating plant-eating insects and plant diseases.

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Still, people should keep in mind that the problem is somewhat more complicated than it appears, he says. A weed, after all, is any plant that grows where people don't want it to grow.

Bermuda grass, for instance, is a much despised weed on Kauai in the Hawaiian islands and several other tropical paradises. In Florida, it's not only the grass of choice for homeowners, but the principal pasture grass for cattle.

Or how about the dandelion — an annual spring curse in Wisconsin but a popular, tasty plant used in salads and wines in some cultures.

For all the attention "World Weeds" has received, Holm empha-

sizes that it's not aimed at mainstream audiences — but at scholars, scientists, medical researchers and commercial firms that develop herbicides. (Which explains its \$195 price tag.)

That's not to suggest that Holm and Doll can't related to the problem experienced by the average homeowner.

Truth be known, both men have encountered dandelions, chick weeds, quack grass and various other bizarre-looking weeds on their lawns over the years.

Their advice: Don't overreact. Try to keep things in perspective.

Doll says he usually uses a mild herbicide to suppress dandelions and never cuts his grass short than an

inch and a half, thus minimizing the growth of other weeds. (Both say that while one must exercise caution when using chemicals, the dangers of such chemicals have been greatly distorted by the media.)

But dandelions are one thing, he says. When confronted with something as innocuous as crab grass, "I just live with it," Doll says. "I mean, it doesn't look that much different from bluegrass anyway. So I don't worry about it."

Which, Holm agrees, may be the soundest advice of all.

Weeds, you see, are a lot like taxes.

Eradicate one — and the moment you turn your back, another one pops up. ♣

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