

MOUSE-EAR CHICKWEED

(Cerastium vulgatum)

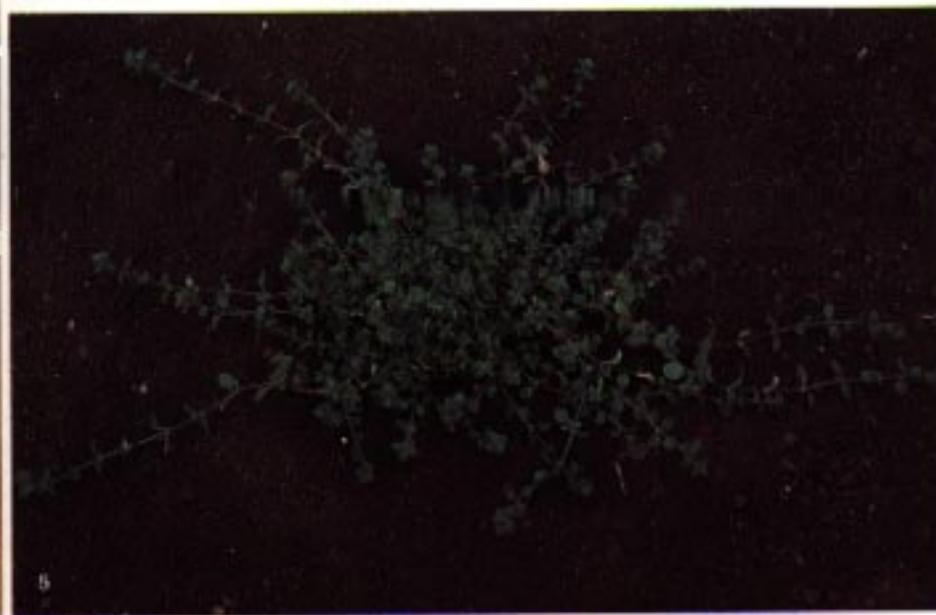
SEEDLING DESCRIPTION

Seedlings of mouse-ear chickweed have two dark green seed leaves (cotyledons) on a very short stem. Cotyledons are round or slightly spoon-shaped, $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) long at most, and may have a few scattered white hairs, especially near the base. True leaves are opposite, more elongated, and covered with the soft white hairs typical of the mature plant. Seedlings grow erect for 2 or 3 inches (5 to 7.5 cm), then the stem branches, and the plant begins its tufted, creeping growth habit.

Spring growth from the previous year's plants takes the form of a tiny rosette without cotyledons.



1. Even seedlings are fuzzy.
2. Hairy leaves resemble a mouse's ear.
3. Flower stems grow upright.
4. Flowers have 5 notched petals.
5. Chickweed has a sprawling growth habit.



BIOLOGY

Mouse-ear chickweed is a perennial herb that reproduces by seeds and spreads by rooting along its creeping stems. The root system is shallow and fibrous. The branched stems are green or purple and grow 6 to 20 inches (15 to 50 cm) long. Flower-bearing stems grow erect, rising about 4 inches (10 cm) above the densely matted growth that forms as the rest of the stems trail along the ground.

Leaves are dark greyish-green, opposite, and attached directly to the stem. They are oval or lanceolate, $\frac{3}{8}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch (1 to 2 cm) long, and $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (3 to 6 mm) wide. Leaves on the lower part of the stem often have clusters of smaller leaves in their axils, where the main leaf joins the stem. The entire plant is covered with short white hairs.

Mouse-ear chickweed blooms continually throughout the summer, producing terminal clusters of white starlike flowers from spring to autumn. The flowers are $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch across and have five slender petals, each one slightly notched at the tip.

Seed matures very quickly and, since the plant blooms from spring until fall, this weed can spread extensively in a short time.

In winter most of the top growth dies back, leaving a compact rosette crown that sprouts again the following spring.

SIMILAR SPECIES

Mouse-ear chickweed is a perennial, though a short-lived one, and is not to be confused with common chickweed (*Stellaria media*), which is an annual. Although similar in growth habit — both form low dense mats — the two weeds have noticeably different leaves and flowers. Common chickweed leaves are bright light-green, nearly rounded with pointed tips, and hairless. Mouse-ear chickweed leaves are dark green, elongated, and covered with soft hairs. Common chickweed has a single straight row of hairs along the stem.

Both plants have tiny, white, five-petaled flowers that blossom from spring until fall. However, the petals of mouse-ear chickweed flowers are slightly notched at the ends, while those of common chickweed are so deeply indented that they appear as ten petals.

Field chickweed (*Cerastium arvense*) is a common pasture weed throughout the United States, except for the southern third of the country. Like mouse-ear

chickweed, it is a perennial and has hairy leaves and stems. But the leaves of field chickweed are so elongated that they bear no resemblance to a mouse's ear. They grow $\frac{3}{4}$ inch to 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches (2 to 7 cm) long and are only about a tenth as wide as they are long.

Little starwort (*Stellaria graminea*) is another perennial chickweed common in the northeastern United States. It is similar to mouse-ear chickweed except that its leaves are smooth or only slightly hairy. Little starwort's leaves are also more elongated, about $\frac{3}{8}$ inch to 2 inches (1.5 to 5 cm) long and $\frac{1}{16}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (1.5 to 7 mm) wide.

All of the above plants belong to the Pink family (Caryophyllaceae).

NATURAL HISTORY

Originally introduced from Eurasia, mouse-ear chickweed is widespread throughout most of the United States except for the far Southwest. It is not generally a weed of cultivated crops because it does not survive tillage. However, it is common on cultivated land that has been abandoned, as well as in woods, pastures, hay fields, and lawns. Mouse-ear chickweed often persists on bare ground and in sidewalk cracks.

The common name, *mouse-ear*, describes the fuzzy oval leaves, and *chickweed* refers to a group of plants often used as a starter food for baby chicks.

Other names for mouse-ear chickweed are starweed, winter weed, starwort, satin flower, and tongue grass.

CONTROL

Maintaining a healthy grass sod is the best way to prevent mouse-ear chickweed from invading turf. The weed can easily take over in areas where grass is thin. Close mowing does not kill mouse-ear chickweed; it only encourages the weed to hug the ground more closely. However, close mowing does help to prevent seed production. Mechanical control may be the best solution in lawns. Since the root system is shallow and weak, small patches may easily be hoed out, and the ground reseeded or laid with new sod. Liming the soil may discourage chickweed in bluegrass lawns.

If mouse-ear chickweed is an extensive problem in established turf, chemical herbicides can bring it under control. MCPP or dicamba is effective and may be applied in spring or fall. However, MCPP kills bentgrass, so dicamba is the better

choice when turf includes this species. These herbicides should not be applied near shallow growing tree roots.

In hay fields, as in turf, the best weed control is to maintain a healthy crop. Using herbicides for weed control is most effective during establishment. If forage seedlings can get off to a good start, their growth can overcome most weeds.

In established hay fields, herbicides should be used only if (1) the resulting increase in yield offsets the cost of treatment or (2) the weeds present are poisonous or otherwise harmful and cannot be removed mechanically.

In established alfalfa, the correct time to apply chemical herbicides is between cuttings, when alfalfa regrowth is less than 2 inches (2.5 cm) tall, or when the alfalfa is dormant. Effective chemicals are also approved for newly seeded alfalfa and for grass hay fields.

For specific recommendations, consult your county extension agent or the most recent *Weed Control Manual and Herbicide Guide*, available through Meister Publishing Company, 37841 Euclid Avenue, Willoughby, Ohio 44094. Follow label instructions for all herbicides and observe restrictions on grazing and harvesting procedures.

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Where trade names appear, no discrimination is intended, and no endorsement by the Cooperative Extension Service is implied.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Pennsylvania Legislature. L. F. Hood, Director of the Cooperative Extension Service, The Pennsylvania State University.

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File No. IVC9 10M587 U.Ed. 86-354