

# Fireweed and Fire Ants

By Sandy Lane

Florida horse owners and ranchers curse these scourges— both being vicious botanical terrorists we could happily do without. But alas, if you have them, it's good to know something about your enemies.

## Fireweed

December heralded the beginning of fireweed season, and it's easy to know if you have it on your place.



You'll know quickly, because if you should pluck it out like an ordinary weed, your hand will burn for 30 minutes, hence the name. Worse, if you're in Crocs or sandals, it's your feet that will burn. Looks like a strawberry plant at first. It's an annual, coming up every winter, and is found usually around bare ground at feeding stations and under fences. It comes in on bad hay maybe bought cheap, or can be spread by mowers.

Fireweed's tiny stinging hairs embed in skin and nostrils and contain irritants that can kill young foals and calves who have eaten or rolled in it. Fireweed is most common in central and northern Florida.

Resistant to common herbicides, it takes heavy-hitter ag chemicals to eradicate it... compounds that you would need to keep your horse away from for at least two weeks— like GrazonNext HL. For small infestations, use a pointy-nose shovel to dig it up, put it in a plastic horse feed bag, staple the top, and send it to the landfill or burn pile. Wear gloves.



## Fire Ants

Like fireweed, not every yard or pasture has them, but they're all over Florida. Theory is, fire ants arrived in America about 80 years ago, thought to have accidentally been on cargo ships from Brazil docking in Mobile, AL ports.

Fire ants' raised mounds with tiny holes are hard to miss, especially if you wander into or near one. And they're sneaky—the worker ants all get in place on your foot or leg, then wait for their leader to give the signal to attack. Ouch! Make a paste of baking soda and water to soothe the pain, then get some Orthene fire ant killer. Read the label and sprinkle the white powder near but not on the nest. The worker ants will find it while foraging and take it down to the queen (or multiple queens) on their feet.



Fire ants make life miserable for humans, pets, livestock and wildlife. The victim is left with a burning sensation, severe itching, pustules and possibly anaphylactic shock—and even paralysis. The welts can itch for up to ten days... but popping them can result in infection. There have been human deaths of people severely allergic to their venom, as well as many deaths of new calves and foals born too close to a mound. To see the power of these hungry scavengers, if you want to clean out a cow or gator skull before the bleach treatment, put the skull over a fire ant mound (enclosed in a metal cage or trap so varmints can't steal it) and see how few days it takes the ants to turn it into a trophy. Meanwhile, watch where you step!

# Agility Starts at the StartLine

By Christy Gammage

“Stay. Staaaayyy. Stay! You come back here right now!” You want your dog to remain in one spot, regardless of where you go or what's going on around them. A good startline stay lets you strategically position yourself on the agility course; but it is also needed in everyday life. And that is where you need to work on it first.



Does your dog even know what a 'stay' is? They can't do it if they don't understand what you are asking for. A good stay is basically a sit or down for long periods (duration) with you some distance away while other things are going on around the dog (distractions). Do you practice it in any form?

Dog sitting, laying down, waiting for food, waiting at the door? The essential part of the stay is that the dog doesn't 'go' until you tell them. You can't use a “Stay” and then forget to explicitly release them in daily life. They will eventually get up and do their own thing, “breaking their stay”. This problem will continue to make any 'official' stay iffy.

So now we have 2 things important to train: the 'stay' and the 'go'. You must train the dog to understand both concepts. Training a stay in basic obedience classes usually starts with you asking the dog for a sit. You can use a “Stay” command, or just expect the dog to remain in the last position you asked for. Then you start adding the 3 D's (duration, distance, distractions) in baby steps. Example: in a quiet/boring location, ask for a sit, dog sits, you reward by handing them a small boring but acceptable treat, wait a couple of seconds, reward, wait a couple of seconds, then release the dog with an “OK” (or other less common word), reward or toss the treat so

the dog stands. Next round: ask for sit, dog sits, wait a couple of seconds, reward, wait 5 seconds, reward, wait 3 seconds, reward, wait 5 seconds, “OK”, reward. Continue increasing the number of seconds (somewhat randomly) until you are up to a minute or more. That was adding Duration. Each practice session should take 5-7 minutes, tops. Next practice start out easy, but progress more rapidly to increase the duration.

In future practice sessions

start with short durations, but add distance and movement. Ask for the sit, take a small step in some direction (still within arm's reach of the dog), reward if the dog stays seated, take a small step in another direction, reward, continue on with 2-3 more small

steps all around the dog, rewarding randomly. Release the dog with an “OK” and reward. Continue this routine with you taking more steps or quicker steps away and stepping back in to reward the dog. Don't forget to release the dog every couple of minutes and reward the release. Eventually you should be able to walk (or dance) 10-20 feet away. Then take your practice outside, then to more exciting places. With more distractions, make distance and duration shorter to begin with.

“What do I do if the dog moves before being released?” Just quietly ask for the sit again and start over.

Work at a level where the dog can succeed. If they are breaking the stay more than 20% of the time, make it easier for them by shortening duration, distance or removing distractions.

For agility you need a solid stay and a blast-off go. Which one is easier depends on the dog's temperament and current emotional state. For uninterested or more quiet dogs, they may be happy to stay. Reward the release with better treats or toy play than the boring 'stay' treat to encourage an enthusiastic go. Release walking away or eventually running away so they have to chase you to get the reward. Throw their reward for them to chase.

For excited, distracted, or overly enthusiastic dogs, it is easy to get a blast-off go (but maybe not when you want it). Work on impulse control and gradually increasing distractions. Better 'stay' treats may help and the actual release can act as the reward, no release treat needed.

While “Stay” may not seem like an agility skill, it makes agility much easier when you have it in the ring.

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In future practice sessions