

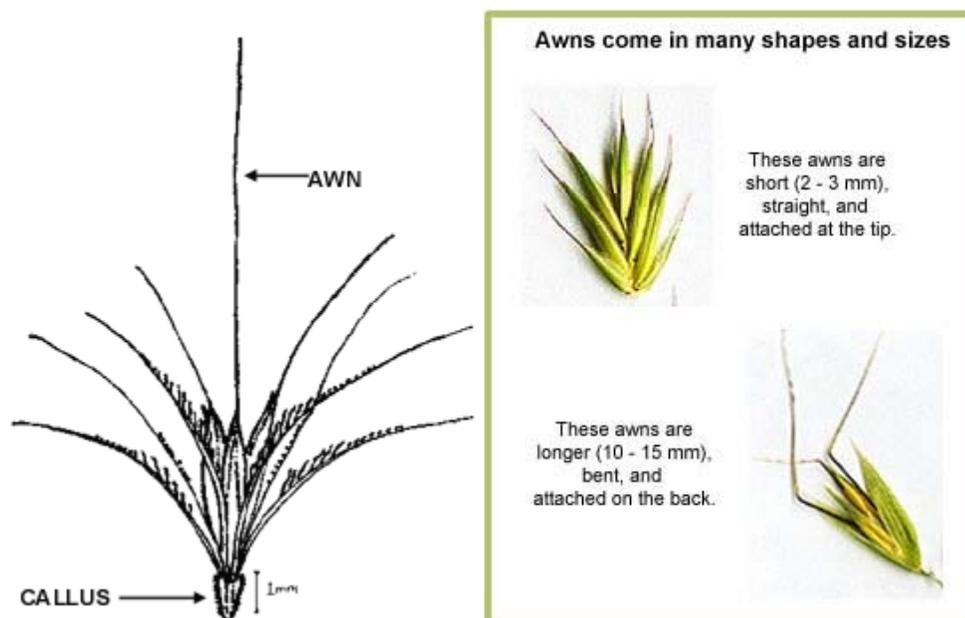
# Spear Grass-an example of nature’s dark side.

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Growing up in Ontario and with low to the ground dogs, I have had my share of experience picking things out of my dog’s fur on their legs and bellies. Burs, nettles, milk weed, dandelion fluff, even chewing gum left on the road - I thought I had seen it all. But it wasn’t until I moved in Victoria did I learn about a far worse plant menace- spear grass!



There are approximately 60 species of spear grass, commonly known under different names. Spear grass is the generic term used for any wild grass that had barbed seeds. These grasses all share similar characteristics, particularly the long awns. An awn is a long, stiff, sometimes-barbed projection at the top end of the grass seed. The part of the grass seed that accomplishes the initial hook can either be the awn or the “callus”- a hard projection at the base of the grass floret that attaches the grass seed to the stem.



Spear grass can be found in many places in and around Victoria, including a number of areas often frequented by dogs such as Dallas Road, the UVIC Dog field, and the off-leash area of Beacon Hill park. The grass is beautiful in its green and purple growing stage, but once it dries out, the spears easily attach themselves to anything that brushes past, including and especially dogs.



However, as any dog owner knows, lots of plants will catch or stick to their dogs during walks, so what makes spear grass so dangerous? Admittedly, in the early spring it does not pose that much of a threat, but as summer progresses and the grass dries it, it becomes a hazard. The awns that carry the grass seeds have a sharp point with fine-hair like stems that spread back from the point. The awns can burrow between the toes of dogs and can migrate through the tissues of the leg. Because of the shape of the grass, it cannot back out the way it came and so can only move forward. Once there, the grass can cause infection in the animal, and many need to be removed surgically.

Feet aren't the only thing at risk on dogs, the underbelly, eyes, ears, nose, groin area and even your dog's throat can be at risk. The seeds found in the ears, eyes and nose can cause very serious problems, even to the point of becoming life threatening if not treated properly. Because the seeds stick to anything and are designed to move forward through the hair to pierce the skin, no body part is immune. Another danger comes from eating the grass, if swallowed the spear will stick in the throat and create inflammation and infection.



So what can you do? While it's not reasonable to deny your dog fun in the outdoors there are things you can do to help avoid spear grass injury. In the late summer when grass seeds "head up" or appear ripe, it is wise to refrain from walking in long grass. Stick to the trails and walk with your dog on a leash. Try to discourage your dog from chewing the grasses late in the summer and into the fall. If you can't avoid long grass, after a run outside carefully inspect between your dog's toes, in the armpits and groin, and look into his ears, eyes and around the nose. If you return from a walk and your dog is doing a lot of head shaking, ear scratching, excessive sniffing, coughing, retching or gagging, is licking their paws or showing signs of discomfort, it may be a good idea to take them to see their vet. Early detection, removal and treatment is the best way to avoid more serious injury or infection.

So have fun out there but be careful and always remember to give your dog to double check your dog after all outdoor adventures- it will save both you and your pet from becoming victim of the infamous spear grass!



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