There's a new "killer weed" that's threatening soybean and sugarcane crops in Vermilion, and farmers should be on the lookout for it, warns Terril Faul, Vermilion county agent.

The "weed," called Raoulgrass or itch grass) actually originated in India and spread to southwest Louisiana via South America.

And, if you think it's just another weed, think again. One acre of itch grass will yield 10 bushels or 600 pounds of seed. For this reason, the weed is very prolific and spreads very rapidly. It is spread long distances by equipment, water and wildlife.

Itch grass was discovered in Louisiana approximately 20 years ago in St. Martin Parish, and was confined to the Teche area until soybean production started, according to Faul.

But since that time, Faul says that the prolific weed has spread throughout the southern portion of the state from the Mississippi River to the Texas line.

And thus far, it has only appeared in Louisiana, with one isolated case in Florida being reported.

In Vermilion, more itch grass can be found in the eastern part of the parish, because there is more cane there but it can be found in all parts of the parish, particularly along roads, ditches and canal levees.

And if the weed is not caught early, it can literally destroy a soybean or cane crop. And itch grass has already dropped its seeds this year, so if farmers spray now, they will still have some next year in their fields.

To identify it, look for a green broadleaf weed with a white stripe down the middle of the leaf. It has outer supporting roots similar to a corn plant. The lower portion of the stem is covered with stiff grass-like hairs. These hairs will brush off on contact, and irritate the skin, thus the name itch grass. The seedhead is spike-type.

The plant begins to grow profusely around mid-to late June.

Controlling the weed is not a simple matter. Pre-emergence control in soybeans can be maintained by Treflan. A newly-released chemical may be used to control post-emergence itch grass. The herbicide, Hoelon 30, can be applied over the top at the rate of 1.33 quarts per acre. Farmers should try and apply this when the beans are 15 inches tall or less.

For sugar cane, the problem is not as easily solved. For instance, although Treflan may be used to control the pre-emergence weed, there is currently no herbicide marketed which will control post-emergence itch grass.

Since the seeds have already dropped, farmers should plan to spray next year before the seeds are out.

To control the weed along ditchbanks and canals, farmers should use NEMST at a rate of four pounds per acre plus two quarts of surfactant per 100 gallons of spray. It should be applied with 40 gallons of water per acre.

Along ditchbanks and canals, farmers may also use Deepson M applied at a rate of 10 pounds per acre plus two to three pints of surfactant per 10 gallons of spray. This is also applied in approximately 20 gallons of water per acre.

A third method for ditchbank and canal control is Roundup. Use one part Roundup to two or three parts of water.

These three herbicides work best when the itch grass is 24 inches or less in height.