

How to Control Weeds

Weeds are simply plants growing in places you don't want them to—plants that you consider undesirable, but insist on growing in your garden anyway. Even the best gardeners have to deal with these nuisance plants. There are; however, ways to deal with reducing the weed problem. Weed seeds exist in the soil of all gardens and can be spread by wind, water, animals and even by the soil amendments we use to help our gardens grow. Horse manure, for example, is widely available and is cheap, so it ends up in our gardens pretty often, unfortunately the horse doesn't digest the grasses and weeds it eats thoroughly enough to kill the seeds. To make matters worse, many seeds in our gardens can remain dormant for several years, they hide out and wait for conditions to be perfect so that they can sprout up overnight (usually the very night after we just weeded the garden).



Prevention is the best medicine. In the fight against weeds, the most important element is to provide the best conditions possible for the growth of desirable plants. Improper watering, soil compaction, insect damage and disease all contribute to weed development. All of these conditions can be easily avoided by proper mulching. The importance of mulch cannot be stressed enough. Mulch protects your soil from compaction from raindrops and even walking in the garden. It retains water long after a rain and slows evaporation too. All of this leads to healthy plants that resist disease and insect damage. Healthy garden plants will crowd out some of the weed invaders, but there is more to it than that!

After fostering a nurturing environment, the second step is to remove any existing offenders by hand. The best time to attack weeds is while they are young, tender and actively growing. Hand weeding is the oldest method around. It works well on small areas, but isn't really appropriate for your entire garden. Without harming your crops, you can till the weeds and turn them into the soil with a weeding hoe or any version of this time-tested tool. In the Spring it is a great idea to till the garden a few weeks before planting, this will give the soil a head-start in warming up and also allow a great number of the weed seeds to germinate, exposing the tender sprouts to a violent death by hoe or shovel!



Now that we have gotten down and dirty in our fight, we can reduce further confrontation by using barriers. Plastic is laid down between plants to block weeds. It works well with crops such as melons, pumpkins, eggplants and tomatoes. You can leave the plastic exposed in the spring to help warm up the soil, but as the sun heats up in July, it is a good idea to cover the plastic with straw or any other light colored mulch to protect the plants from overheating. Many gardeners have found that covering the plastic proves to be inconvenient when trying to clean up the garden for the winter, it also gets caught up in the tines of our tillers. An excellent alternative is ordinary newspaper. It is organic, it can be tilled into the soil the following Spring and is a lot cheaper than rolls of black plastic. Use a layer about ¼- inch thick and wet it down as soon as you lay it to stop it from blowing away. Leaves, grass clippings, straw, sawdust and wood mulch are all great choices for blocking weeds, conserving moisture and adding organic material to the soil and are perfect for covering the newspaper or plastic.

Live mulches are gaining a lot of respect in the garden. This idea is simple, using a fast growing and short plant to cover the surface of the soil around the garden plants. Thyme is a perfect choice for this method, it can be established quickly from seed, enhances the flavor of many other plants, helps keep insects at bay, and smells so

good when you step on it! Another use of living mulch is the cover crop. If you plant rye in the fall, it will protect the soil from erosion all Winter, add lots of good organic material to your soil when turned over in the Spring, and won't allow weeds a chance to get established in your plot.

Finally, there is now a product that you can apply to stop weeds from germinating in your organic garden! Corn Gluten meal is a by product of corn syrup and cornstarch production. It contains nitrogen and protein and is sold as animal feed for cows, chickens, and is used as filler in pet foods. Corn Gluten meal can be applied as fertilizer and as a pre-emergent weed killer. It has been shown to inhibit the growth of dandelions, crabgrass and many other annual weeds. It needs to be supplemented with phosphorus and potassium if you plant to use it for fertilizer though. If you purchase chicken feed, be sure to check the label to ensure at least 60% corn gluten meal, it should say so near the protein content portion of the label. The best thing about this method is that it is almost completely safe. Kids and pets can walk on it barefooted without worry. The only concern is application rate, ten pounds is perfect for a 500 square foot plot, if you go heavier than that, you may not get the seedlings you want to emerge! Some gardeners purposefully apply heavily in paths, it works well and nothing grows there for the entire season!

Well, that is the low-down on weeds. They are a pain in the grass, or the garden. Good luck in your own personal battle, and if you have any tips, send them to us!



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