



Weed Wars

By Paula Bertram

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“Plant and your spouse plants with you; weed, and you weed alone.” Jean Jacques Rousseau
(really!)

There’s a lot to admire about weeds; they’re akin to guerilla fighters. Tough, resilient, adaptable, they can thrive in poor conditions, seemingly disappear under direct attack, and then reappear in a flanking action. Did you know a single weed seed can lie dormant for more than 1000 years, and then sprout? No wonder we feel like we’re in a constant war with these pesky plants.

But what is a weed? The simplest definition is a plant growing where it is not wanted. This makes sense: Rye grass is a real pain when it invades your lawn or veggie garden, but may be terrific forage in a horse paddock. That variegated ivy that was so cute in the Mother’s Day pot with the balloon could now be completing a hostile takeover of your Japanese maple.

A couple of simple concepts about weed types. Stay with me now: it’s really easy. There are annual and perennial weeds. Annuals (think zinnias or marigolds) are plants that complete their whole life cycle in a season, and then die. Annual weeds are the same--their seeds sprout, the plants grow and flower, then they die. So what is the most effective way to defeat annual weeds? Right -- prevent seeds from forming! More on this later. Common annual weeds are Ryegrass (*Lolium*) and Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*).

Perennial weeds are a lot more tenacious. They live on from year to year, and have larger root systems. We have to either catch them as young plants in search-and-destroy missions, or attack them over time to reduce their vigor. Think Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) and Oxalis (or sorrel, *Oxalis corniculata*).

OK, down to the nitty-gritty. How do we keep these guys under control and/or in their proper place? The methods fall into a few categories; cultural, mechanical, physical, and chemical.

Cultural: this means giving your desirable tomato or rosebush a competitive edge. First of all, select the right plants for your garden site. For example, if watermelon takes 110 days of high summer heat to mature and you live in shady Pollock Pines, the weeds are going to outcompete your poor melon every time. Make your soil as hospitable to your plants as possible with proper tilling, irrigating, fertilizing, rotating crops and avoiding soil compaction. Believe it or not, just these basic gardening practices will eliminate 60-70 percent of your weed problem.

Mechanical: this is your old-fashioned hoeing, digging, pulling, mowing and chopping... i.e., going “mano a mano” with your weeds. My favorite tool is a hori-hori knife, which looks like a vicious serrated bayonet. As with all sharp tools, employ proper safety techniques and its use can be very satisfying. Make sure you get rid of those annual weeds before they go to seed—like, put down this paper and get outside now!

Physical: Mulching can be a very effective way to prevent weed seed germination and weed growth. A variety of mulches such as compost, newspaper, straw or a combination of these should be placed on the ground several inches thick. Inorganic mulches are such things as landscape cloth or plastic; these sheets can be covered with more attractive materials such as pebbles or bark. A special use for plastic sheeting is called solarization. The weedy patch is watered well, then securely covered up with clear plastic for 2-3 months during the summer (weight the edges down). The heat that accumulates under the plastic kills weeds and voila, a nice clear patch of soil to plant. Don't forget the amending, tilling and so forth before you plant. Solarization can also kill or drive away beneficials, such as worms, but they will return.

Chemicals: In the words of the UC Davis Master Gardener Handbook --“The Last Resort.” Because herbicides can harm many plants (not just targeted ones), and are implicated in the disappearance of frogs and other beneficial citizens of your yard, they are the most problematic way to control weeds. Discussion of safe use of herbicides such as diquat dibromide, 2,4-D and Roundup (glyphosate) is complex, and beyond the scope of this article. If you use chemicals, make sure to read all labels and follow instructions to the letter. And don't let herbicides drift onto your vegetable patch or your neighbor's prize-winning rosebush.

Spring is almost here—happy gardening.

Join Master Gardener Thorne Barrager on Saturday, March 23rd at 9 a.m to noon for a free public class on Backyard Chickens. Why raise chickens? Find out how easy and inexpensive it is to maintain chickens, how they provide chemical-free bug and weed control in a garden, and can manufacture one of the world's best fertilizers. Class will be held at the Veterans' Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Drive, Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.