



UC Marin Master Gardeners
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Advice to Grow By ... Ask Us!

STAY ON TOP OF WEEDS SO THEY DON'T TAKE OVER!

By Nanette Londeree, Marin Master Gardener

Most likely you don't need an introduction to weeds. They can be a nuisance and detract from the overall appearance of the garden, but more importantly, they can rob the soil of precious water and nutrients. They also can serve as hosts for insect pests and pathogens, provide cover for rodents and be allergens to many people (think hay fever or poison oak).

Weeds, simply put, are plants growing where they aren't wanted - those pesky things growing around the base of your roses or trees, in among your perennial bed or creating a mosaic pattern in your lawn. Almost any plant - from grasses to trees to shrubs, under the right conditions, can be considered a weed. They come in a myriad of shapes, colors, sizes, and degrees of tenacity...some are pretty easy to control, while others, like bindweed (or what I consider the Kudzu vine of the west) seem to withstand and almost thrive on significant abuse. Common weeds (both grasses and broadleaf plants) that plague our gardens are annuals like bluegrass, crabgrass, mallows, purslane and spotted surge, and perennial types - bermudagrass, bindweed, dandelions, nutsedge and oxalis.



An overall weed management program involves preventive and removal methods. Preventing weeds from sprouting will make your life a whole lot simpler, especially given how prolific some types are in producing seeds. Purslane, for example, can generate over fifty thousand seeds from one plant! Prevention generally focuses on some type of weed suppression through garden design, habitat modification or horticultural controls. A garden area designed with no water or soil (driveways, paths, patios) would eliminate the elements necessary for the plant to grow, while modifying a habitat - reducing the available water (using drip irrigation) and sunlight (adding mulch) would make life difficult for weeds to germinate and sustain growth. Examples of horticultural controls would be crowding of plants to reduce the available space for them to grow or planting types that have some level of inhibition for seed germination. If you already have weeds, then you might employ physical or mechanical methods of removal like good old hand pulling or hoeing. Heat, in the form of soil solarization, is also an effective eradicator, especially when planting a new bed. Clear plastic sheeting placed over the area to be treated for a period of four to six weeks during the warm summer months can kill both existing weeds and their seeds.

Generally, for most home landscapes, chemical treatment is a last resort as it requires an understanding of the lifecycle of the weeds to be eliminated, soil characteristics, weather and location as well as the multitude of product choices - pre- or post emergent, contact or systemic, selective or non-selective, and the pros and cons of each type. No single product will do the entire job of controlling all weeds.

Safety should always be a priority when using an herbicide, both for people, pets and other garden creatures as well as other plants. Many ornamental plants are extraordinarily sensitive to broad-leaf weed killers and even the slightest amount of drift can cause stunted, twisted, cupped, curled, chlorotic foliage and even death to your plants. Damage from the popular non-selective herbicide glyphosate (*Roundup*) is commonly mistaken for disease or insect damage, and symptoms may not appear until the season following accidental exposure.

For more information on weed management click here:
<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/menu.weeds.html>

Photo courtesy UC IPM website.