



## Four Good Reasons to Hate Weeds, and What You Can Do About It

by Sharon Plein, UC Master Gardener

An old Spanish proverb states: “More grows in the garden than the gardener sows.” This seems especially true in recent months. We experienced an exceptionally long period of warm, dry weather in the fall followed by significant rainfall in December. Despite the brief freeze that followed and our ongoing drought, the yard and garden weeds appear remarkably vigorous of late. In fact, the winter crop of germinating weeds such as annual bluegrass, oxalis, clovers, and speedwell are already flowering and producing seeds for the next cycle. That is why I have declared vegetation warfare in my garden and I have four good reasons to hate weeds!

**The first reason** to hate weeds is that they take up space and discourage desirable plants. The defining characteristic of a weed is that it grows where it is not wanted. Most weeds are taller, rangier and seem to grow faster than more pleasing plants. Weeds make the whole garden less attractive and appear untended. Many weeds, like annual bluegrass and dandelions, are prolific seed producers. Their seeds can remain dormant in the soil for years and germinate under favorable conditions. They want to move in and take over more space.



Weed with soil

**The second reason** to hate weeds is that they steal water and nutrients from the plants you deliberately cultivate in the garden. While the weeds seem vigorous and healthy, the other plants appear puny and starved for water and fertilizer. It is curious that during this time of water restrictions, weeds appear to flourish without irrigation.

**A third reason** to hate weeds is that many of them harbor harmful insect pests like whiteflies and spider mites. Some weeds have stickers, thorns, or other noxious characteristics as well. Goatheads, stinging nettle, and poison oak are a few plants to avoid removing or touching unless you are protected by gloves and long sleeves.

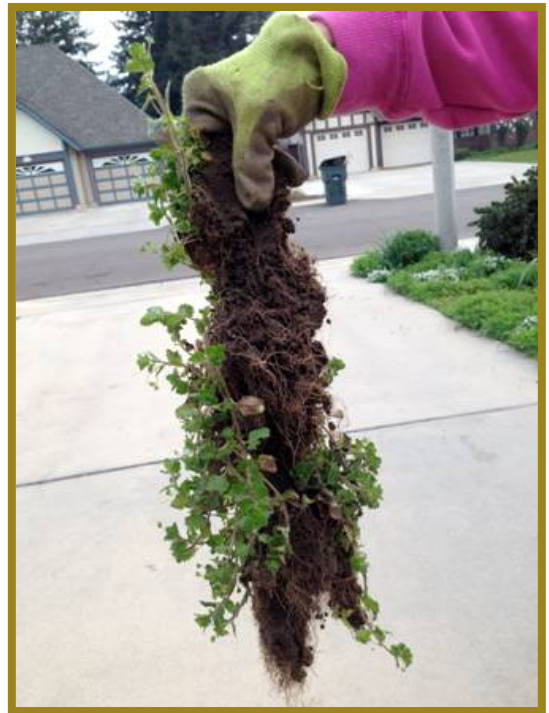
**The fourth reason** to hate weeds is that they have greedy root systems. Not only do they take up space above the soil and steal water and nutrients intended for other plants, but many weeds, like Persian speedwell and annual bluegrass, have large fibrous root systems that create dense mats under the soil. Mechanically removing these weeds with hoes or shovels creates large divots and removes valuable topsoil that should be replaced. Other weeds, like dandelions, have long fleshy tap roots that require excavation to insure they do not show up for a repeat performance.

There are effective steps a gardener can take to prevent weed infestations. **The best plan is to prevent weeds from becoming a problem.** Nip them in the bud, so to speak. There are various tools in the weed preventing arsenal. Using water permeable landscape fabrics, for instance, prevents weed seeds in the soil from germinating, yet permits water to percolate into the soil. Water permeable landscaping fabric is available at hardware stores and nursery outlets. It is easy to install but it must be covered by mulching material such as bark or compost to prevent it from tearing or deteriorating. Using a thick layer of mulch alone is another effective weed deterrent that has the added benefit of conserving moisture in the soil. Any weeds that germinate in the mulch are usually fairly easy to hoe or pull out.

There are also several pre-emergent herbicide products available to the home gardener. Amaze (oryzalin and benefin), Preen Garden Weed Preventer (trifluralin), and Halt's Crabgrass Preventer (pendimethalin) are dry granular products that are sprinkled and watered into garden soil, creating a barrier that prevents seeds from germinating. Other gardeners' tools are post-emergent sprays, herbicides that are sprayed on actively growing weeds. Products containing glyphosate, diquat, or herbicide soaps are non-selective. This means they kill or greatly harm plants on which they are sprayed. Application may also be problematic: a poor aim or drifting spray will likely cause collateral damage to other landscape plants.

There are selective sprays available for specific weeds, like oxalis, spurge, broadleaf weeds in grass lawns or weedy grasses in ornamental beds. A product like Grass Getter (sethoxydim) or Grass-B-Gon (fluazifop) kills grass, but not other plants. It is a wonder product for eradicating common bermudagrass from shrubs and groundcovers. There is a plethora of 2, 3, and 4 chemical combinations aimed at getting rid of a wide spectrum of broadleaf weeds. These products often contain 2,4-D, dicamba, mecoprop, triclopyr, and quinclorac. To learn which herbicides work on what weeds consult a UC Pest Note, found at: <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/menu.weeds.html>.

If you want to eliminate weeds from your garden all year long, start early and stay diligent. Remember that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. You can easily be the victor in the war on weeds.



Roots of speedwell

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