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ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS  
**How to win war on weeds**



Sam Calderon pulls weeds from rows of corn at Middleton Farm in Healdsburg. Beth Schlanker/Tre Press Democrat 2016

**Question:** I have an ongoing battle with weeds in my garden. How can I get them under control?

**Answer:** You're not alone. This is a common problem and an ongoing chore. It's important to keep weeds under control as they may compete with your desirable plants, harbor pests and produce allergens.

The first step is identifying your weeds because the best method for controlling them varies by type. Here's a link to the most common weeds in Sonoma County: [bit.ly/3uqmGBG](https://bit.ly/3uqmGBG). This link will help you identify additional weeds: [bit.ly/3KfBh7f](https://bit.ly/3KfBh7f). Using the following link, you can access Pest Notes for individual weeds: [bit.ly/3yA7YcZ](https://bit.ly/3yA7YcZ). Pest Notes give specific recommendations for removal and control, starting with the safest methods in keeping with the principles of Integrated Pest Management: [bit.ly/490guOZ](https://bit.ly/490guOZ). The following are the basic methods for weed control:

Hand weeding and cultivation: Hand weeding is time consuming, so it works best for controlling scattered annual weeds before they set seed. It must be done regularly to keep such weeds under control. Cultivation with a hoe or other sharp tool must be done carefully to avoid damage to desirable plants and drip systems. Avoid deep tilling, which can bring buried seeds to the surface.



Colby Accaccian, a part-time farm manager at the Coyote Family Farm in Penngrove, cuts through thick weeds. Crissy Pascual/Petaluma Argus-Courier 2017

Mowing and trimming: Mowing works to control large areas of weeds, provided the blade is set low enough to cut off flower heads before they set seed.

String and blade trimmers serve the same function and are easier to use in small areas, but be careful to not damage the trunks of trees and bushes. These methods work best for controlling annual broadleaf weeds and can make other types of weeds less noticeable.

Mulching: A 2- to 4-inch layer of organic mulch such as wood chips, bark, straw, leaves and grass clippings will not eliminate all weeds, but will keep them to a manageable few that can be hand-picked or cultivated as needed. Newspapers or cardboard can be placed under mulch to provide additional weed suppression. Here's more information on mulch: [bit.ly/3TDbmw5](http://bit.ly/3TDbmw5)

Heat: Boiling hot water can be used to suppress young weeds, especially broad leaves. It's a good choice in areas where hand weeding is difficult, such as walkway and driveway cracks, along fence lines and near woody plants.

In larger areas you can solarize the soil using the sun's heat to kill weeds and their seeds. This method involves covering moistened soil with clear plastic for four to six

weeks in summer to heat the soil to a depth of 12 to 18 inches. Therefore, it must be used in an area that receives full sunlight. Solarization is more effective for controlling annual weeds than perennial weeds. Here's a link to soil solarization: [bit.ly/3RgcJzh](http://bit.ly/3RgcJzh).

**Synthetic barriers:** Black plastic under mulch does provide good weed suppression, but being nonporous it blocks air and water from reaching the soil, which will deprive any plants in that area. It also tends to break down quickly so it isn't a good long-term solution.

Landscape fabric, also known as weed cloth, is an improvement since it's designed to be porous. However, over time it also will break down and the small openings can become clogged, which can further restrict the flow of water and air. Some weeds will still come through and can be hard to remove.

This solution is not suitable for annual beds or for areas where plants are expected to spread through self-seeding or root systems. It may be a good choice for pathways and in areas where you have gravel or rock, as the barrier will help keep them from sinking into the soil. Here's additional information on landscape fabric: [bit.ly/4bmlyzi](http://bit.ly/4bmlyzi).

**Natural herbicides:** There are a number of environmentally friendly herbicides containing essential oils, soaps or acetic acid. They affect only the green parts of weeds they come in contact with and don't kill root systems, so they have limited effectiveness and work best on small annual weeds. Here's a link for further information on natural herbicides: [bit.ly/3UR3xIC](http://bit.ly/3UR3xIC).

**Pre-emergents:** Pre-emergent herbicides kill weed seedlings as they're germinating. There are a variety to choose from, depending on the type of weed. Late fall applications control winter weeds and early spring applications control summer weeds. Both must be watered in.

Don't use them in areas where you want to plant flower, grass or vegetable seeds. Here's additional information on preemergence herbicides: [bit.ly/3QS2TTH](http://bit.ly/3QS2TTH).

**Chemical control:** Chemical herbicides should be used only when needed, and in combination with other methods of weed control.

Some types of chemicals control a specific type of weed (selective), and others kill all vegetation (non-selective). Always carefully read warnings and follow instructions exactly to avoid injury and contamination. Here's additional information if you use this approach: [bit.ly/4avGFOi](http://bit.ly/4avGFOi).

*Contributors to this week's column were Wendy Stern, Diane Judd and Joy Lanzendorfer. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County <https://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/> provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to [scmqpd@gmail.com](mailto:scmqpd@gmail.com). You will receive answers to your*

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