

How to win the war against weeds

By: Dottie Baltz

Battling weeds on a daily basis in our gardens can be a daunting task. So much so that it can discourage new gardeners and experienced gardeners from gardening at all. But if you plan ahead and practice a few simple techniques on a regular basis, you too can win the war against weeds.

A weed is generally defined as any plant that you have not put there and do not want there. Sometimes, changing your perspective on what is a weed and what is not a weed can make your gardening a lot easier.

First, you really need to familiarize yourself with the weeds that grow in your area. Not all weeds are bad. Some weeds are considered wildflowers and are actually sold in garden centers, so if you know what you have, you may decide that living with some of the weeds is better than trying to remove every single one.

Check your local library for books on weeds. I have a great book called "Weeds of the Northeast". I also have a book called "Wildflowers of New York". Many of the plants in the wildflower book are also in the weed book. Look for books or websites that not only show full color photographs of the plants, but that also have information on how they spread, where they like to grow as well as information on their origin and if they are considered invasive in your area. Remember, not all plants grow in all regions, so look for information geared towards where you live. Many states have a Cooperative Extension office that is full of regional information.

Figuring out what your garden style is, is the first step in deciding just how diligent you need to be when it comes to keeping weeds out of your gardens. A wildflower garden may need no weeding at all, whereas a cottage style garden may only need minimal weeding and a formal manicured landscape will need constant maintenance.

When preparing your garden beds, it's important to remove all weeds and their roots before you begin. This can be accomplished by digging up any sod or weeds before planting or you can prepare your beds using the Lasagna Gardening Method, which requires no digging at all. If you've never heard of Lasagna Gardening, check out Patricia Lanza's book on the subject.

You can also remove weeds by using an herbicide, but I prefer to remove them manually so as not to harm the soil and the beneficial microbes in the soil. If you have some time to work with, laying black plastic over an area will kill the existing grass and weeds, but it should be left in place for several months to be effective. The black plastic will deprive the soil from light, air and moisture, so the existing plants have no choice but to shrivel up and die. Clear plastic can be used as well, but works better during the heat of the summer. Clear plastic will actually heat up the soil so much that the plants underneath it cannot survive. If you decide to use one of these methods, the soil will need rejuvenating before you plant. Add a two to three inch layer of compost on top of the soil and allow it to rest for several weeks before planting. Mix the compost in as you dig holes to plant.

Once the area is free of existing plants and weeds, you may need to till or break up the area with a pitch fork to make it suitable for planting, especially if you have compacted soils. But a word of caution here; the more you turn the soil, the more you will bring weed seeds up to the surface to germinate. If your soils are so compacted that planting is nearly impossible, go ahead and turn the soil, mixing in compost as you go, just remember you should definitely use mulch after planting to help prevent light from getting to these seeds and germinating them. You can also turn the soil and then wait a few weeks before planting, just pull any young weed seedlings before planting. Raised beds will eliminate the need for turning the existing soil. A great book called "Weedless Gardening" written by Lee Reich has more information on this subject.

To keep creeping plants and grasses out of your beds, you should consider using some type of edging material that goes a few inches below the surface of the soil. This barrier will help prevent these types of weeds from creeping into your beds. Aggressive weeds like creeping charlie or Bermuda grass will sometimes grow over the barrier, but the barrier will slow it down considerably. If you don't want to purchase a plastic or steel edging material trenching all around the bed will prevent weeds from growing into the bed for a short time, but trenching will likely need to be done a few times a season for maximum impact. All trenching means is to dig out a "v" shape all along your beds and removing the soil and sod from that small area.

Once you have the area prepared and your plants are in place, you need to mulch the area to prevent light from reaching the ground. You still want water and air to be able to get to the plant roots, so I suggest sticking with organic mulches rather than inorganic mulches. Organic mulches will break down over time and enrich the soil as they break down. Examples of organic mulches are newspaper, shredded wood, leaves, grass clippings, compost, pine needles or straw. Examples of inorganic mulches are stones, plastic, weed fabric or shredded tire mulch.

You don't need to buy mulch. Many people have all the mulching material they need right on hand, but if you live in an urban environment or prefer a certain look, you may have to buy mulch. Just remember, as the plants grow and fill in, you won't see the mulch as much, so think about this before going out and spending lots of money on mulch. You may also be able to get free or low cost mulch from your local dump, highway department, or tree service.

Mulching should be done in the fall before winter sets in or in late spring after the soil has had time to warm up. I like to put a layer of black/white newspaper under my shredded wood mulch. The newspaper helps to block the light more efficiently and I don't need to use as much of the wood mulch. If you are mulching in the fall and have spring flowering bulbs mixed in with your perennials, you should use no more than two layers of newspaper under your mulch. If you use more, the newspaper will actually block the bulbs from sprouting properly. Using 1-2 layers of newspaper is OK because when wet, it's pretty weak and the bulbs can push through. Plus, it has already started to decompose by the time spring arrives. I tend to mulch in the spring, mainly because I like the look of fresh mulch, so I use several layers of newspaper under the mulch. 6-8 layers is about right and will last most of the season. Wet down the newspaper so it doesn't blow away, overlap it a couple of inches and then put whatever organic mulch you'd like on top. A 2"-3" layer is sufficient. Using newspaper under my mulch has been a huge time saver for me, as I rarely have to weed those areas for several weeks to several months during the growing season. The amount of rain you get in a year can also affect how long your newspaper will last in the garden, so the wetter your region, the more newspaper you will need to apply.

Another advantage to using newspaper in the garden is that it is free if you already subscribe to the newspaper or have neighbors who do (make sure you let them read it first before putting it in your garden). And it's a great way to attract beneficial critters to your soil, like earth worms, that will help to improve your soil. It's also very easy to cut a hole in the paper if you need to plant something new.

I am not a big advocate of weed barrier fabrics. They can be expensive and they don't add any nutrients to the soil, but in the right situation, they are better at controlling weeds than mulch alone, or nothing at all. I use weed barrier fabric under stepping stones in pathways or around shrubs and trees that do not have perennials planted in between them. Since it will be much harder to improve the soil over time using a weed barrier fabric, I would suggest amending the area heavily with compost before planting and then fertilizing with a compost tea on a bi-weekly basis to keep the soil in tip top shape.

There you have it; my tips on battling weeds in your garden. As you can see, the prep work makes all the difference in the world.

Happy Gardening!

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