

ASK A MASTER GARDENER



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Master Gardener

What is a weed?

Question: My New Year's garden resolution is to plan out my garden so it is easier to maintain. I seem to have some plants that have taken over my yard. How do I choose plants that won't spread and cause me more work?

Answer: You have asked a question that I deal with in my own landscape every year.

Why did anyone ever think planting English ivy was a good idea? What about that little bed of mint you started for your occasional summer mojito? You probably have enough mint now to supply most of Douglas County.

No one I know likes to weed, so a little prevention on bringing in plants that are likely to spread aggressively will save you a lot of work.

First of all, what is a weed? In one area of my yard, I have some comfrey (*Symphytum*) that I consider a weed. I inherited it from a previous owner. I know it has a lot of uses and benefits, but for me it is a plant that I'm always having to contain. It has deep, fleshy tubers, which apparently multiply when I try to dig them up. I used to have chickens and was told they loved comfrey – apparently mine were too proud to help me out by eating the stuff!

I also have a lot of the flower Love-in-a-Mist (*Nigella*) growing around my vegetable garden area that I tolerate but did not cultivate (it is pretty, but in moderation).

The Merriam Webster dictionary definition of weed is "a plant that is not valued where it is growing and is usually of vigorous growth." In other words, you might consider all the poppies in your own yard a beautiful sight – your neighbor might consider them a weed.

After all, most of our cultivated plants originated from



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Bee balm, a plant that could potentially be a problem in your garden, range in height from 8-48 inches.



Lily of the Valley is a perennial, rhizomatous plant that provides ground cover for shady sites.

a native plant, native to some other geographic area.

Before we add a new plant to our garden, it is a good idea to do a little research on the

plant – how does it spread? Here's where you want to really watch out for these key words or phrases: vigorous, self-seeds, rhizomes, runners, spreads, etc.

The other thing to keep in mind is that a plant might be a vigorous grower in one situation but not another – for instance, a plant that prefers

to grow near a source of water probably wouldn't grow aggressively in a drier area.

Lots of plants are sold that can potentially be problems if they are well-adapted to where you are planting them in your yard. This doesn't mean you shouldn't plant these varieties – I have several potential trouble-makers in my landscape, and they are easily managed where they are growing.

Some plants are better suited to containers or in beds where you have some kind of physical barrier to keep them in bounds. If a plant is notorious for self-seeding, then dead-head the flowers before they go to seed. Often some of the hybrids are sterile and don't produce seeds. Just know before you plant.

A few of the plants in our area that can get out of hand if not managed: Bee balm (*Monarda*); lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*); lamb's ear (*Stachys*); Chinese lantern (*Physalis alkenkengi*); spotted bellflower (*Campanula punctata*); forget-me-not (*Myosotis*). This is a small sampling of plants that could potentially cause you problems.

There is another group of plants which should be mentioned here, and I hope to cover it in a future article: Oregon invasive species. Most of the plants I've mentioned above are simply a nuisance if they spread in your yard. English ivy, though, is on the invasive species list and should never be planted. I will discuss invasives in a future column.

The best advice whenever adding a new plant to your garden is to know what you are getting. Read the label and pay attention to the key words above. Do your research and don't introduce a problem in your yard.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461 or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service. serve the people of Douglas County.