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GAINING GROUND ON Weeds

Question: My vegetable garden is suddenly being overrun with weeds! Do you have some tips on how to control these pesky plants?

AnsWER: After a cool, very wet spring here in Douglas County, suddenly summer is upon us with sunshine and rising temperatures – which is good for our struggling vegetable gardens, but unfortunately those “wascally” weeds also love these conditions too and are making up for lost time!

First of all, let’s define what a weed is. According to one dictionary, a weed is “any wild plant that grows in a garden or field where it is not wanted.” Plants that we consider weeds are a hazard or nuisance or can cause injury to people, animals or a desired crop.

Every garden has weeds – the wind and birds disburse them everywhere, they hibernate in the soil from rhizomes and root systems deep down, hitch a ride on pets and clothing, and aggressively and quickly outcompete garden crops by sucking up all the light, water and nutrients.

They can carry viruses and disease, and smother whole plants.

So what to do? Take a deep breath and realize this is a daily battle, but weeds can be

managed and controlled with persistence and know-how.

The first step is to get familiar with your garden weeds. Weed identification can help you know their habits and how to deal with them. If you don’t recognize a weed in your garden, pull it up and take it into the Master Gardener Plant Clinic where volunteers can help you name it and give you tips on how to control it.

You can also email photos into the clinic.

The two most common types of weeds are annuals and perennials. Annuals spread by seed and die in the winter, but their seeds remain in the soil and can be viable for years. Perennials thrive year after year with aggressive root systems that can be difficult to eradicate.

To get a handle on weeds, there are at least three approaches to take: preventative, mechanical and finally chemical as a last resort.

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” goes the old saying. Examine your garden tools, compost and hay used for mulch which can all bring in weed seeds to the garden. However, most of the weeds coming up every year were produced right there in your garden after being left unattended and allowed to go to seed.



Bonnie Courter
Ask a Master Gardener

Therefore be diligent to control weeds all season long – don’t let them go to seed in the first place.

Mechanical methods by hoeing, plowing, hand-pulling and mulching provide good weed control when used on a regular and continual basis. Pull weeds when the soil is damp, not wet. When dealing with perennials, if you persistently remove new weedy shoots, you prevent the plant from storing carbohydrates.

This process is called “carbohydrate starvation” which eventually kills the plant, but it also must be done diligently – almost every day – to be successful. Even bindweed and bishop’s weed can be controlled in this way, but again, persistence is the key!

Get seedlings when they are small by hoeing frequently. There are all kinds of hoes – the classic garden hoe, the scuffle hoe, Warren hoe – each has its special use. For weeds that have tap roots, I use a hand weeder

that has a forked end to it and a leveraging piece as seen in the photo.

Dispose of invasive weeds that have gone to seed by bagging them and taking them to the landfill.

Mulching is super important in controlling weeds. Mulch not only keeps the soil surface cool and cuts down on evaporation, but it also makes manual weeding so much easier.

Apply organic mulches such as dry leaves, straw (NOT hay, as hay is full of weed seeds) and dried grass clippings 2-4 inches deep to your garden. Avoid black walnut tree leaves as they can inhibit plant growth. Also don’t use lawn clippings if the lawn was mowed when weeds were in seed.

For controlling perennial weeds, place a layer of garden fabric on the soil before applying the mulch. Be careful of any purchased compost you add to your garden as it often contains weed seeds. Ask employees at the business what they do to their compost to avoid weed seeds. Better yet, make your own compost.

Overhead sprinklers not only tend to spread fungal diseases by wetting the plant leaves, they also encourage weed growth by covering a large area of bare soil. Instead,

install drip irrigation systems to deliver water directly to your vegetable plants, thus slowing the number of weeds. Garden centers and big box stores carry easy-to-assemble systems.

As I stated, chemical control is your last resort and should be used judiciously, especially around vegetable crops. It’s important to pick an herbicide that is specifically targeting the stubborn weed you’re trying to kill. The label will tell you what weeds it is for. Always read and follow the label, and especially be careful not to allow the spray to drift to other plants nearby.

Unfortunately, weeding is a gardener’s lot in life, but by being proactive in keeping weeds under control, your task can be made a lot easier. When checking your garden daily, always bring along a hoe or hand-weeder to stay on top of things. It pays off in the long run.

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