

LANDSCAPE PLANNING

Practical Techniques for the Home Gardener

The online companion to the book

ARTICLE

[Back to article index page](#)



From the list of common lawn weeds, such as dandelion, plantain, thistle, creeping Jenny, burdock, meddick, etc. – which can you tolerate some of, a little of, none at all?

Straight Talk About Lawn Weeds, Part One

My Rose, Your Weed

The definition of a weed is simply, a plant we don't want or value in a particular place. Everyone is familiar with the old gardening nugget – One man's rose is another man's weed. Gardening is personal, vested with attitude and opinion at the turn of each petal. One gardener establishes an admired stand of plume poppy (*Macleaya cordata*), sells the property, and the next owner wages war against the feathery plumes and their underground runners. Or the previous owners of your home seed white clover (*Trifolium repens*) into the lawn to keep it green in drought, and you're vexed with removing clover from an inherited lawn.

It's easy to identify the plants you want, but more puzzling to determine which unwanted plants you'll tolerate. From the list of common lawn weeds, such as dandelion, plantain, thistle, creeping Jenny, burdock, meddick, etc. – which can you tolerate some of, a little of, none at all? Perhaps some dandelions if they're not too big, but no thistles? (This writer's bargain with Nature.)

The use of broad-spectrum herbicides like Killex and many other lawn weed products (including weed n' feed fertilizers) prevents gardeners from seeing the weeds in their lawns, eliminates some useful weeds, and also removes the option of making choices. Drenching the lawn in a toxic herbicide bath is an effective weeding strategy, but it removes more than the weeds – it removes information. You can't begin to develop a tolerance to plants you can't see. And there are good reasons for accepting some weeds in a lawn or at the back of a planting bed.

Most weeds are ancient perennial or biennial plants that have evolved over millions of years. They are wild indigenous species, and many of them are in the same plant families as familiar garden perennials you may purchase in a nursery. Perennial geraniums trace their ancestry back to a charming woodland weed, Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*), that reproduces rapidly in shady garden beds. Weeds are ideally adapted to the conditions in your garden and resilient in your region's soil and weather circumstances – which is why they keep coming back. Frost, drought, flood, or landslide won't eliminate them, and there are enough of their soil-banked seeds to last into perpetuity. It's smart to know your weeds, their capabilities, and how some of them might be useful.

If you can put the idealistic image of a golf green out of your mind, you'll notice that most lawns have many plant constituents – that is, different kinds of plants growing together, all mowed at the same height, and generally green in color. If the lawn is well maintained (watered and mowed weekly, and fertilized once a year, in autumn), they mass with turf grasses into an acceptable ground cover. Most of the non-grass, or weed

plants, have strong drought resistance, remaining green when extended summer droughts arrive. They have low moisture requirements, and won't go dormant and become brown. Some, like clover, are capable of manufacturing nitrogen and fertilizing the lawn. Others, like plantain, provide valuable food for foraging birds -- plantain seed was once packaged as feed for caged birds. Damaging lawn insects such as chinch bugs and white grubs find the mix of constituent plants unappealing. Beneficial insects like ground beetles and spiders relish the supportive habitat of a mixed lawn where they forage for weed seeds. A lawn containing up to one-third non-grass constituents is attractive, drought-hardy, repellent to destructive insects, encouraging to beneficial insects, and more resilient after excessive frost or drought. And most important, serious health hazards to you and your family are avoided by not using pesticide chemicals.

Desperate Measures to Buy Time

In a perfect world, gardeners begin the day with an hour of weeding in the cool morning air. But in reality, it's not always possible to hand dig weeds just as they are spreading into new lawn territory and planting beds. Eventually you find time to work on removing weeds, but your efforts may be sporadic and lag behind their robust and expansive spread in early summer.

Here are some desperate measures that can be applied in less than ten minutes. They won't solve the weed problem, but will temporarily prevent the spread of most weeds until you're able to devote a longer period of time to permanent removal.

If weed seeds are sprouting in newly prepared soil, for instance a new perennial or vegetable bed that won't be planted for a week or ten days: cover the soil with an old blanket, shower curtain or tarp, or even a thick layer of newspaper (up to 10 sheets thick, no colored sections) held down with stones. The object is to damage the seedlings with direct contact and cut off light.

If newly prepared soil isn't going to be planted for several weeks, cover it with a sheet of clear plastic (dry cleaning bags or a paint drop sheet), held down all round the edges with soil, rocks or bricks. Sunlight passing through the clear plastic will super-heat the soil and cook weed seeds and any seedlings that may sprout.

When mature weeds are standing tall and putting up thick foliage amidst ornamental plants, quickly rip off their leaves. Yes, the root systems are intact and will immediately begin regenerating foliage. But it will take three weeks for them to put up another cluster of leaves, and you can be ready for serious removal efforts when they show themselves again.

The worst possible circumstance is to allow weeds to flower, because that will result in the rapid distribution of thousands of seeds. Pulling off the flowers will set the plants back for a short time, until they initiate new flower buds. Weeds like dandelion and yellow avens (*Geum aleppicum*, the ancient ancestor of modern *geum* cultivars 'Lady Stratheden' and Mrs. J. Bradshaw') have flower buds ready at various heights, low in their crowns, and on multiple stems, so can be back in business literally the next day. Either take the time to pull every visible bud off, or plan on making a pass through the garden each morning to pull off open blooms. If you return from vacation to find a sea of yellow dandelions, get out the lawn mower and cut them down. (Be sure to rake up the debris, which will contain some seeds ready to sprout).

Of course these are only temporary gestures and don't address the strategies and methods of effective weed removal. And that is another article.

© 2008 Judith Adam. All rights reserved.

Judith Adam's books are available through many mainstream and speciality bookstores, and can be purchased online through amazon.com, amazon.ca, and chapters.indigo.ca.

