

ASK THE MASTER GARDENER WHY WEED?

Let's face reality: weeding is a never ending job. You could even make it a full-time job and never run out of work. So why weed?

Weeds compete with plants for nutrients in the soil, for water and for sun. It sure seems like weeds grow faster and stronger than most other plantings in my garden. Weeds also provide shelter for garden pests such as slugs. And they can spoil the looks of a beautiful yard or garden. Now, how do you identify a weed?

All of us recognize dandelions, buttercup, morning glory and thistles, but what about the rest? There is a great book entitled Weeds of the West which is published by The Western Society of Weed Science in cooperation with the Western United States Land Grant Universities Cooperative Extension Services. You can find it at most local book stores or they will order it for you.

Most weeds in your food garden are annuals, which means they will die at the end of the growing season, but not before spreading thousands of their seeds to guarantee their presence next year. Annual weeds produce an enormous amount of seeds, so it is important to pull those weeds before they set seeds. If possible, it is better to prevent them from getting started by cultivating the soil and then covering it with mulch. Ten days after you plant your garden, cultivate the ground lightly around the seed bed to destroy the new weeds. Rake very shallowly so as not to bring up more weed seed, because the weed seeds just need the light to germinate. Just keep at it gently and every time you go into the garden, pull the weeds as you see them.

Perennial weeds are the ones that cause the most problems in your gardens. Perennial weeds are tough and can grow through heavy mulch. To get rid of perennial weeds you must get at the roots. For example the roots of the Canada thistle can go down 20 feet! If you leave just a tiny bit of root, the weed will regenerate and appear again. So the trick is to keep pulling whenever you see a weed and use a tool that goes deep into the soil to get as much of the roots as possible. If the weed reappears, repeat this practice, and it will eventually die. Then clean up your weeds, and mulch, mulch, mulch. Mulching is a good form of weed control. Plastic mulches are good in late fall and early spring. Hay, straw, and leaves are all good to use during the growing season. They help retain moisture and cool the soil.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.