

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
Date: Nov. 27, 2005  
Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

On a recent trip to Japan, I came upon two gardening displays that left me mulling over the definition of a weed. Most of us would agree that a weed is a plant growing in a spot where it isn't wanted. That's why I was tickled to look out the sliding doors of a exquisite Japanese restaurant to see a tasteful planting of horsetail (*Equisetum*). I've been in on many conversations at the WSU Discovery Garden about how to get rid of this pesky plant, and one answer might be to make friends with it. I once heard the host of a popular garden radio show in this area recommend horsetail, to the horror of many listeners, but in fact it can be grown quite easily and considered aesthetically pleasing. It is also agonizingly difficult to get rid of, once established.

The second instance of garden "heresy" that I witnessed in Japan was on a trip to Kokedera, the Moss Temple. Here over one hundred varieties of moss grace a stroll garden that has earned the designation from UNESCO as a place of World Cultural Heritage. How many times have I heard my Northwest neighbors bemoan the proliferation of moss in their lawns, while my husband tries, relatively unsuccessfully, to cultivate it in our backyard? In fact, the famous Moss Temple garden in Japan was not originally planned as a moss garden, but the site ended up being the perfect environment for it.

As long as people have been cultivating plants, there have been weeds springing up where they aren't wanted. Beyond just being a plant you'd rather not see in your garden bed, there is a classification called "noxious weed". The Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board puts out of a list of non-native species classified into three categories, with Class A weeds having the highest priority of being eradicated. These weeds we are required by law to control. Invasive species are those that have the ability to invade native eco-systems, crowding out and endangering the usual plants growing there. Oftentimes the invading species replace other plants used by wildlife for food or protection. Some of the names on that list are surprising. Meadow clary (*Salvia pratensis*) is sold by garden centers in other parts of the country, and giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*) was actually featured in a garden magazine as a dramatic ornamental. Spanish broom (*Spartium junceum*), and its lookalike Scotch broom, (*Cytisus scoparius*) are still occasionally planted in yards, as are English ivy and butterfly bush (on the Oregon Noxious Weed List).

Sometimes we unwittingly import a plant that is considered noxious in our area. Texas blueweed (*Helianthus ciliaris*) sometimes shows up in wildflower seed collections, and thistle seed sold as bird feed can easily make its home in a garden bed. If you have a question about the identity of a plant, you can bring it to a Master Gardener Plant clinic. To see if a plant has earned a "noxious" designation, visit the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board's website at <http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/>. The easiest way to control unwanted weeds is through prevention--discouraging weeds so they don't compete with your desired plants, and stopping the weeds from going to seed, once they have grown.

The information provided in this news release is for education purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by Cooperative Extension is implied. Cooperative Extension programs and employment are available to all without discrimination.

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

---