

# Weed Management in the Ornamental Garden

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## Managing weeds in an ornamental garden

I try to celebrate the value of weeds (i.e., plants that I didn't invite to my garden). I relish the lemony zest of common sorrel in soup and delight in the beauty of dandelions scattered on a spring lawn. Still, I don't want weeds crashing my garden party! And if they do sneak in, I don't want to spend hours a day trying to evict them. I bet you can sympathize. What to do?

With weed management, as with most problems, I've learned that prevention is much easier than war. Accordingly, let's consider prevention strategies that aim to reduce the number of weed seeds that are blown into the garden as well as the number of plants that march in by rhizomes and roots.

### Strategic Garden Design.

Design your ornamental garden to minimize border contact with lawns where invasive plants lurk. If light conditions and aesthetic considerations allow, plan your garden to have at least one border that's not "green." It could be a building foundation, a solid 6' fence, a sidewalk, a driveway or a road. (See the garden photo above.)

It seems counterintuitive, but it's often easier to garden in the city than in the country! For those green borders that can't be eliminated, try installing edgers—metal, vinyl, or concrete dividers—that separate the garden from invasive plants. Sink the edger at least 8 inches deep, leaving about 2 inches above ground.

### Informed Plant Choices.

Include evergreen trees or shrubs with foliage that blanket the ground. In addition to providing four-season interest, these woody ornamentals behave like groundcovers, shading out weeds and out-competing them for water.

You might also consider short ground covers that provide a pleasing carpet once established. Be careful to avoid plants that can overwhelm desirable species. Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) and a variety of dead nettle (*Lamium purpureum*) can be just as invasive as weeds.

Include native and other well-adapted plants in your gardens. Their vigor helps them tough it out with weed "thugs."

### Yard Grooming.

Some weeds produce thousands of seeds that can be blown by wind for miles. To reduce their menace, mow a 25 to 50-foot swath around your garden *before* weeds set seed. And hope that your neighbors will do their share.



Concrete paths, foundations and a fence in the background create a weed-resistant border in this well-designed Mount Vernon garden. The thick mulch and spreading ground cover help with weed control. *Photo by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

Alas, even the best-designed, best-protected gardens harbor some weeds that steal resources from your invited plants. Eradicating them effectively is all about “knowing thy enemy.” Using a tool such as WSU’s online Hortsense ([pep.wsu.edu/hortsense](http://pep.wsu.edu/hortsense)), identify your weed, its life cycle and recommended management strategies.

It is important to know whether your weed is an annual or a perennial. Annuals reproduce from seeds, complete their life cycle and die within a year. Thus, eliminating them before they set seed is crucial. Winter annuals are among the most insidious weeds since they germinate in fall and flourish in winter, which is no one’s favorite time to weed. The best motivator is a very sharp hoe with which you shave the small weeds just beneath the soil surface—much quicker than hand weeding. Even if some weeds survive and “replant”, another shaving should finish them off. The trick is to shave weeds when they are very small— ideally less than one-inch tall.

Perennial weeds become dormant in winter and regrow in spring. Like annuals, they are much easier to remove when they are small. Perennials with tap roots (e.g., dandelions) may require a digging tool to help you extract as much root as possible. If plants re-grow from root fragments, dig them again. In a couple of months, even the most persistent should weaken and die.

Many gardeners swear by “flaming” with propane tools. As with digging, flaming may need to be repeated to kill weeds—especially those with taproots.

Finally, a mulch of 4-5 inches of organic matter, such as bark or arborists' chips, can suppress weed seed germination, improve and lighten your soil, and make weeding easier.

Because weeds can only be "managed" rather than vanquished, our gardens will always require some attention. But by reducing your garden's weed load, weeding can become restful and meditative rather than endless and frustrating.

Happy strategic gardening!



**Left:** *Cardamine hirsute*, also known as shotweed or bittercress, is an annual winter weed best hoed at this size. If allowed to flower and set seed, it will earn its name by shooting thousands of seeds that can remain viable for several years. **Above:** The gardeners nightmare... *Taraxacum officinale* (the common dandelion) in full seed. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

## **RESOURCES:**

- WSU Hortsense. <http://pep.wsu.edu/HortSense>
- *Annual Winter Weeds*, WSU Extension, January 200. <http://gardening.wsu.edu/column/01-04.htm>
- *Weeds, The Gardener's Most Persistent Pest*, WSU Extension, September, 1999 <http://gardening.wsu.edu/column/09-04-99.htm>
- *Dandelions*, UC Davis, IPM Online <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7469.html>
- *Shot Weed*. WSU Spokane Country Extension, 2006

- *Controlling Weeds*, WSU Clark County Extension, 2004  
[http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm\\_tips/ControllingWeeds.html](http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/ControllingWeeds.html)
- *Managing Weeds in Shrub and Flower Beds*, Journal of Pesticide Reform/Winter 2006. Vol. 26, No. 4.
- *Dandelion*, Michigan State University Weed Science.  
<http://www.msuweeds.com/worst-weeds/dandelion/>
- Solomon, Steve. *Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. 2007
- Coleman, Eliot. *New Organic Grower*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1995.