

Identify Your Weeds

By Kathy Wolfe
May 14, 2021



Possessing knowledge is the key

A weed is generally defined as something growing in a place it is not wanted and is competing with desired plants. How do you know if what you have is a weed or a plant? Many gardeners jokingly say that if you tug on it and it comes out easily, it is probably a plant, not a weed. There is some truth to that!

But why bother with them? It is known that some weeds such as dandelion, chickweed and mustards, are edible. (Before attempting to eat wild plants, be sure they are properly identified.) They often provide habitat for various insects, some of which are beneficial to the garden and provide shelter, pollen and nectar for bees and predators. Many have long roots that help break up soil and bring elements from the subsoil to the surface. So why can't we just "live and let live?"

Because weeds are bullies! They grow faster than cultured vegetables and are quite efficient at reproducing themselves. They compete with crops for nutrients, water, and light. Tall weeds shade plants and interfere with air circulation; they may increase humidity and slow evaporation of rain and dew that can lead to foliage disease. Weeds can offer overwintering protection to some insect and disease problems. And, if you leave them to thrive in your garden, they bring generations of their friends and family to take over your plot.

Weeds that are spread by bird droppings, are carried by the wind from adjacent areas, brought in with introduced soil from a potted transplant or in compost, or tracked in on gardener's shoes. Believe it or not, every square inch of your garden contains weed seeds but only those in the top inch or two of soil get enough light to germinate.

Most weeds are either annual or perennial. Knowing the difference can help you control the variety more efficiently.

Annuals weeds grow from seed; they flower, set seed and die in one year. They produce huge amounts of seed. The better you control your annual weeds by not allowing them to produce seed, the fewer seeds will be present the following year and overall populations will decrease. Perennial weeds live three or more years, typically die back in the fall and send up new growth in the spring. They reproduce by seeds and by spreading vegetatively by stolons (above ground stems), by rhizomes (below ground stems) or through a spreading root system. It is important to repeatedly cultivate these roots and stems to deplete the plant's food reserves stored in their tissues. This will eventually kill the plants.



This is the start of a white stonecrop. Weed or pot-up? Your call. *Photo by Kathy Wolfe / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Common characteristics of many weeds include deep, fleshy roots; extended seed dormancy (how long seeds can stay viable in soil); high seed production; or allelopathy (the ability to produce chemicals that kill off other plants, so they maintain a stronghold).

There are several ways to identify your weeds. If using a field guide or diagnostic website, you will need a good description of your plant. Dig out the weed including the roots, flowers, and any fruit. You can lay it on a cookie sheet and take a photo showing all its aspects. Note the leaf arrangement on the stem. Do the leaves come out of the base of the plant or on the stem? Are the leaves opposite each other or alternating on the stem? Is there just a simple leaf or is it compounded (having several leaflets)? Are the roots short and numerous, long and running or a long taproot? Look at the flower structure and fruit type for details.

Field guides are a good addition to any gardener's library. Good resources for field guides include the 2020 PACIFIC NORTHWEST WEED MANAGEMENT HANDBOOK, (extension.oregonstate.edu) and WEEDS OF NORTH AMERICA, by Richard Dickinson and France Royer (uchicago.edu), which includes information on 500 species plus photos of most at every life phase.

You might choose to send in a sample to the Skagit County Master Gardener plant clinic for identification. Include all aspects of the plant sealed in a zip-lock bag with a dry paper towel and take it to one of their clinics. Include a description of where you found the weed (garden, lawn, roadside, marsh, etc.) to help them narrow down their answer. (NOTE: "We are not currently taking samples from the public due to COVID-19 restrictions. If you need help please contact our Skagit County Master Gardener plant clinic online at skagitmgplantclinic@gmail.com.")

You can also try an interactive diagnostic website such as "Is This Plant a Weed?" by the University of Minnesota. Study your plant and click through prompts to identify your weed. Or you can search the Internet for "mobile plant ID apps" (most are free). Just take a photo, send it to the app and it comes back with the closest match.



This *Geranium Robertianum*, commonly called herb Robert or stinking Bob, is a Class B noxious weed with a distinct odor. *Photo by Kathy Wolfe / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

What is the best way to control weeds in our garden? Whether your plant is annual or perennial, you need to prevent it from seeding next year's crop. An old garden saying is "Pull when wet; hoe when dry." Use an old kitchen fork to twist out roots, a fishtail weeder or knife for severing deep tap roots, a handheld or large hoe or just a gloved hand to dislodge them. Pull them out before they flower or dig up the roots so they dry out and die. Avoid disturbing surrounding soil that might expose new weed seed to light.

If you cannot pull or dig them, cut off the flowers before they seed. Pruning loppers, a string trimmer or lawnmower may help keep seeds from spreading. Do weed patrol weekly and persistently cut down and root out perennials until their food source is diminished to the point they cannot sustain themselves.

Unless your compost heap is well-managed and becomes hot for a long period of time, weed seeds can endure. You can solarize small batches of moist weeds in a black plastic nursery liner that is enclosed in a clear plastic bag and placed in the sun for several days or just remove them from your yard.

Deprive the weeds of light by mulching 2-3" over the garden bed. You can cover your soil surface with a light-blocking sheet of cardboard, newspaper or biodegradable fabric and spread mulch on top to kill larger areas of weeds.

We all know that nature abhors a vacuum so planting your beds tightly will leave no room for weeds. However, stick to plant guidelines when working with plants prone to foliar diseases.

Other recommendations include watering only your plant, not the weed, by using drip irrigation; check nursery plant pots for weeds that might get introduced to your garden. Clean your tools often so weed pieces will not be transferred from one area of the garden to another. Examine plant divisions closely before moving them to another section of the yard so that no unwanted weed roots come along for the ride. Keep your garden edges trimmed to prevent weed invasion.

The bottom line with weeds is not to let them get a foothold in the first place. Be persistent—and happy weeding!

RESOURCES:

- “Weed Management Handbook.” A Pacific Northwest Extension Publication, Oregon State University.
[Weed Management Handbook | Pacific Northwest Pest Management Handbooks \(pnwhandbooks.org\)](http://pnwhandbooks.org)
- “Weed Management in the Home Garden.” Richard Jauron, Iowa State University Extension, Revised June 2009.
[Weed Management in the Home Garden \(iastate.edu\)](http://iastate.edu)
- “Is this plant a weed?” University of Minnesota Extension interactive website.
[Is this plant a weed? : Garden: University of Minnesota Extension \(ummn.edu\)](http://ummn.edu)
- “Controlling Weeds in Home Gardens.” University of Minnesota Extension.
[Controlling weeds in home gardens | UMN Extension](http://ummn.edu)
- “Weeds in the Home Vegetable Garden.” Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Horticulture, Publication 426-364, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Tech, Virginia State University.
[426-364 .pdf.pdf \(vt.edu\)](http://vt.edu)
- “Six Tips for Effective Weed Control: Proven methods for controlling weeds in your garden.” Barbara Pleasant, Fine Gardening, Issue 127.
[Six Tips for Effective Weed Control - Fine Gardening](http://finegardening.com)
- “Weed Control Techniques: How to get rid of weeds.” The Old Farmer’s Almanac, June 5, 2019.
[How to Get Rid of Weeds | Weed Control Techniques | The Old Farmer's Almanac](http://theoldfarmer.com)
- “How to Know Your Weeds, with Richard Dickinson.” “A Way to Garden Podcast with Margaret Roach, May 16, 2016.
[how to know your weeds, with Richard Dickinson - A Way To Garden](http://awaytogarden.com)