

Take early action to foil noxious weeds in garden

Why is it always the plants you don't want that tend to be the first to sprout?

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ALWAYS USE CAUTION: If using a pre-emergence herbicide, select a product that is safe for your particular site.

When the days get longer and temperatures are marginally warmer, I always get the urge to garden. If you've been following our "Grow Your Own" series, you've amended your soil, bought seed, and sown your cold-season crops. All that's left is to visit your garden daily and search for the first green sprouts. Unfortunately, in most cases, the first sprouts you'll see will be weeds! I began this year's gardening season on March 7 by pulling cheatgrass out of my perennial herbs.

Why do weeds show up first? There's a category called "winter annual weeds" that sprout in the fall when we are lucky enough to get some rainfall (remember October?) These weeds, including cheatgrass, bur buttercup, redstem filaree and early



A Scotch thistle

annual mustards, lurk under the snow just waiting to burst forth and grow fast as winter ends.

To make your job of garden weed control easier, you may be tempted to use a pre-emergence herbicide. There is a variety of products on the market, most often sold in granular form. These

chemicals are applied to the soil surface and watered into the top inch or so of soil. As seeds germinate and contact the pre-emergence herbicide, root growth stops and the sprouts die. Most pre-emergence herbicides are nonspecific and will kill any sprouting seeds, so don't use

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About this series

This article is the seventh in a University of Nevada Cooperative Extension series on starting your own vegetable garden. Articles explore such topics as site selection, ordering seeds and preparing your soil. To find the complete series of articles, go to our "Grow Your Own" page at www.unce.unr.edu



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Cool-season crops done by mid-June

them in areas where you plan to sow seeds in the top inch or so of soil.

Before you decide to use a pre-emergence herbicide, make sure you've selected a product that is safe for use in your specific site. Read the label. It will list specific crops on which it can be used. There are quite a few pre-emergence herbicides on the market, but not all can be used in vegetable crops. Some locally available alternatives contain either the active ingredients trifluralin or dichlobenil. Formulations of trifluralin are available for use in vegetable gardens, as research has shown that there is no significant absorption or translocation of the herbicide in crops grown in soil treated with it. On the other hand, dichlobenil cannot be used in edible crops.

Next, remove any existing weeds from the site. If plant roots have grown deeper than the layer containing the herbicide, they will survive. Pre-emergence herbicides are not effective in killing established weeds. After you've cleared all the weeds,



Medusahead

Expert advice: Learn to identify life cycles. Annual and biennial weeds reproduce by making seed. To control them, keep them from forming seeds. Pull, cut, dig or hoe annuals and biennials before flowers bloom. Perennial weeds, on the other hand, reproduce both by seed and by roots. Controlling them is more difficult and requires persistence.

read the label again, and apply the product according to the directions. Once watered into the soil, trifluralin will remain active for 9 to 12 weeks. You may find you need a second application later in the season to control summer annual weeds.

If you prefer to avoid the use of herbicides in your veggie garden, there are many non-chemical alternatives to effective weed control. The key

is to check your beds regularly and remove weeds when they're small seedlings. At this point, they're usually easy to pull or hoe.

For more lasting nonchemical weed control, consider mulch. It not only helps reduce weeds, but also retains soil moisture. Place organic mulch over layers of sevgen to nine sheets of newsprint or single flattened brown paper grocery sacks to increase weed control, or use landscape fabric under mulch. One year, I received a donation of used casino carpet that I cut to fit the walkways between my raised beds to eliminate weeds. It worked great, and the garish orange color faded quickly in the sun.

Tips to maximize success in controlling weeds:

Set your level of tolerance for weeds. Soil contains billions of weed seeds, and it's not realistic to expect to totally eliminate every single weed from your property.

Know your pest. It's especially difficult to identify weeds when they're seedlings, but it's the easiest time to control them.

Control weeds when they're young. Monitor your property regularly and pull or remove seedlings. If you wait until the weeds are mature and have produced seed, you've made your job more difficult for the next several years.

Avoid disturbing the soil. Soil disturbance often brings weed seeds to the surface where they can grow, and it creates perfect habitats for weed seeds to lodge and sprout.

Weed-proof appropriate areas in your landscape by installing landscape fabric covered by 3 to 4 inches of mulch.

Read herbicide labels and make sure the product is appropriate for use on the specific type of weed and site. Spot-spray the herbicide on the plants in question, rather than applying it to entire areas.

Don't apply an herbicide if it's windy or rain is expected.

About the author

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