



Controlling weeds without herbicides

When our world begins to show signs of spring, most of us think of warm, delightfully sunny days. There is also the less appealing aspect of spring, one that can be a big problem especially after a rainy winter, like the one we just experienced.

A weed is a plant growing where it is not wanted. It is not necessarily what most people would call a "weed." It could be any plant, depending on circumstances. For instance, if tomatoes were planted in one spot in one year, and showed up as volunteers in that spot in subsequent years, then they are weeds.

The troublesome plants we generally consider to be weeds are usually not as pretty as the plants we bought and installed. They take water and nutrients from the plants we want. Whether mustards, or thistles, dandelions or Bermuda grass, whatever kind of plant they are, they are problems.

Getting rid of them can be a challenge. They seem to appear after the intrepid gardener thought the spring cleanup was finished. Since so many start-off as low growing rosettes, they can be difficult to pull out by hand. This is particularly true when they appear in rock mulch.

The temptation to use herbicides may be irresistible. I strongly recommend them only as a last resort, for several reasons. Calling these chemicals "weed killers" is misleading. If a chemical is listed to kill grassy weeds, it will probably be as toxic to ornamental grasses as it is to Bermuda grass. If something kills "broadleaf weeds", it may damage a number of ornamentals as well.

The herbicide label contains valuable information on when to apply, under what temperatures or wind speeds, what weeds it will control, and potential health or environmental hazards.

Unfortunately, those guidelines are written in a tiny typeface, one that requires a magnifying glass.



There are several other ways to lower the weed pressure before these chemicals need to be applied.

The first is prevention. Putting down mulch so that weeds are shaded can limit their seedling germination. Planting ornamentals in layers from short to tall plants is another way to shade weeds out.

There is weeding: pulling up or digging out weeds, removing as much and as many as possible. While some of the tools for this, like hoes, have been around since the dawn of horticulture, they are still useful.

Slightly more exotic methods are also effectual. Flaming, which entails aiming a fire to the base of a rosette, will kill weeds, not by burning them, but by boiling their sap. Less of a fire risk but still effective is steaming - a burst of steam from a household steam cleaner will also boil the sap and kill it. This is a godsend for weeding in rock mulch.

No matter what the weed control method, it will be most effective when the weeds are small. As spring dances in, look for the tiny new weeds and get rid of them before they take over.

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