

Herbicide and heat



When weeds appear, it irritates careful gardeners who refuse to share their space with uninvited plants. Weeds, we know, are plants out of place. They might be beneficial plants whose benefits have yet to be discovered.

That sounds innocuous, except for weeds' unfortunate tendency to take precious resources away from our favorites. Weeds are particularly efficient at exploiting the system for water and nutrients, neither of which can we spare. Would they be weeds, otherwise?

We pull, hoe, and cut them down. When that fails, it is tempting to go to the hardware store or nursery for a container of "weed killer." As if a chemical could be sprayed onto a leaf and it would know whether to damage the plant or leave it

unscathed! No, the chemical knows nothing. People should replace the term "weed killer" with "herbicide" – literally "plant killer". Herbicides are designed to affect types of plants, whether those plants invaded the landscape as problem weeds, or were tenderly planted by an attentive gardener.

Midsummer is the time when weeds appear to have taken over gardens. They come up through rock mulch, push unwelcome flowers into the middle of the lawn, and sprawl over carefully groomed sidewalks. They thrive when it is too hot to get out and start weeding. By a sad coincidence, the heat of the summer is a terrible time to apply herbicides. Most herbicides are not designed to be effective at 90° or hotter. They can evaporate and drift onto unintended targets, damaging them.

Even if herbicides do not evaporate, heat can cause them to break down before finishing their job. That means the money and labor of spraying or distributing the herbicide is wasted. Galling! Look at the label before applying. It should give an upper limit of temperature.

A potentially more dangerous issue is that pesticide poisoning can mimic heat exhaustion. A number of herbicides may cause nausea or dizziness if the applicator is careless.

While insecticides cause more serious to health problems, this is no reason to ignore the safety warnings on the herbicide package.

Gardening or any outside work, without proper precautions may result in cramping, heat exhaustion, or worse.



Abdominal cramps frequently mean that one has been losing more water and electrolytes than is healthy. Cramps are the body saying – get into the shade and sip a nice, long drink. Not beer or anything alcoholic. A cool sports drink is best.

Cramps may not occur. Heat exhaustion, far more than just getting tired, may happen first. If you lost much salts and water, you might stop sweating; you might look red or pale; you can become dizzy, feel nauseous or get a headache; you can even faint.

If any of these things happen, call it a day, go inside, have a drink, take a cool shower, and rest. Any tasks can wait or be delegated.

The best thing is to prevent problems by drinking enough, working early in the day, wearing light clothing, and taking regular breaks. If symptoms get worse, call 911.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for Clark County Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.