



## Time to think about weed control

Among the many wonderful elements of life in the desert southwest is our capacity to garden year-round. In fact, many plants that can be treated as perennials here would be killed off by winter cold in other areas. People living in most of the U.S. are not usually harvesting tomatoes in December. Granted, there are the occasional nights when temperatures drift below freezing, but these are so rare that plants which require a certain number of chilling hours to flower or produce fruit are severely limited.

Even this ability to grow through most of the year has its drawbacks. Our dry climate prevents most pathogenic microorganisms from causing diseases, but plant disease is not the only problem. The generally wonderful weather is also provides a nourishing environment for weeds. Fall and winter rains, while not particularly heavy, are an important factor in the appearance of growth we neither planted nor wish to see in our gardens.

It may seem premature to be issuing a weed warning so early in the New Year, but now is the time to create a plan before they become a major problem. This is a necessary adjunct to the exciting planning that goes with the opening of a new spring growing season. Uncontrolled weeds draw essential nutrients and water from our desired landscape, and they can also be a harbor for insect pests that cause many problems later in the year.

Weed prevention is more important than weed control; “an ounce of prevention” is an absolutely true maxim here.

What are some reliable means to keep unwelcome plants out of our precious gardens?

The first should have been done in the previous year, killing or removing annual weeds before they had a chance to set seed, if it were possible to do so. There are almost always a number of escapees ready to invade once the climate becomes more amenable to them.

To keep weed seedlings from emerging, a layer of mulch is essential. Blocking light from the soil inhibits their germination. Mulch will not work against established perennial weeds, unfortunately, and the longer they have been in the ground, the larger (and more robust) their root systems. Seedlings of annuals and biennials will mainly be stopped.

Taking care to irrigate only desirable plants, and not weedy areas, is another cultural practice that can keep weeds from becoming a problem.

One of the only organic weed prevention “chemicals” is corn gluten meal. Not all researchers have found it as effective as it first seemed. It can inhibit many seedlings under certain circumstances, but there has not been any research into its efficacy in a desert environment. It is not selective, and can inhibit the seeds of vegetables and flowers just as easily as it does weeds; hence it should be applied judiciously.

This is not the same as cornmeal; it is a byproduct of the corn syrup manufacturing process. While not a “magic bullet”, nor as readily available as conventional herbicides, it may, in addition to the other means, be worth trying.

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