

How to Weed the

EDIBLE GARDEN





What is a weed?



Weeds are plants that crop up in places where we don't want them. They appear in our gardens, in agricultural land, in riparian areas, and other spaces where they out-compete desirable or cultivated plants for soil, sunlight, nutrients, and water. You may wonder what purpose weeds serve, except to annoy us, but many of them can be useful, providing habitat and food for pollinators and other wildlife, and covering bare soils to prevent problems such as erosion and even localized flooding.

Weeds are extremely good at propagating themselves. Most set copious amounts of seeds (some, such as stinkweed, can produce 15,000 seeds per plant!). Those seeds can remain viable (capable of germination) for a very long time. The seeds are usually dispersed by wind, but birds and other wildlife can also carry them. This means they can travel great distances. In addition to reproducing via seeds, some weeds also propagate vegetatively, using extensive, spreading root systems that are difficult to remove.

Weeds are also better than most of our cultivated plants at withstanding and thriving in harsh conditions. They can tolerate the extremes of drought and excessive moisture, and heat and cold. Weeds also tend to be adaptable to a wide range of soil types, which means they can grow just about anywhere. If you want to give your edible garden its best chance at success, it is important to remove competitive weeds.

Different Types of Weeds...



Knowing if the weeds you are tackling in the garden are annual or perennial will help you in your fight against them. Annual weeds grow from seeds. In the space of one growing season, they germinate, grow, produce seed, then die. The seeds they set ensure that new plants sprout year after year. Common annual weeds include chickweed, crabgrass, lamb's quarters, and purslane.

Some perennial weeds have deep taproots. Others have extensive root systems called rhizomes. They can also reproduce via seeds. Perennial weeds can overwinter and live for many years. Due to their aggressively-spreading root systems, they are far more difficult to eradicate than annual weeds.

Quackgrass, a common perennial weed, has rhizomes that can reach 90 to 150 centimetres (3 to 5 feet) in length! Dandelions, bindweed and thistle are other examples of perennial weeds.



How Can I Identify Which Weeds are Growing in My Garden?

When your garden plants have just sprouted, it can be hard to tell if those new green shoots are the plants you want to keep or if they are weeds. The seed leaves (called cotyledons) of many plants are very similar in appearance, which doesn't help matters. It is advisable to plant in square feet or in rows instead of randomly sowing, as you'll typically be able to spot weeds when they come up between your properly-spaced seedlings.

Always use labels in your garden bed to help identify the plants you've just sown. Remember, weeds tend to be highly aggressive and fast growing, so if you notice that there are several plants shooting up far more quickly than others in the bed and they seem to be encroaching on everything around them, there is a good chance that they are weeds and you can remove them. (Bear in mind that some vegetables, such as squash and beans, grow extremely quickly and vigorously as well. If you're in doubt about whether or not to pull a mystery plant, wait until you can clearly identify it).

If you need help figuring out which weeds are in your garden, there are many weed identification resources available. Look for government or university extension documents online. Some provinces have invasive species councils, which provide educational support and opportunities to learn about invasive plants and how to control them. Garden experts from regional horticultural societies and garden clubs may be good sources of information, or you can hire garden consultants to visit your yard in person and offer advice.



Noxious and Prohibited Noxious Weeds – What is the Distinction?



Each province in Canada has laws governing the control of invasive species. Some weed plants are designated as noxious or prohibited noxious based on several factors. They all spread extremely rapidly, and can out-compete cultivated species. This is a particular concern for anyone who is growing food. An overabundance of weeds can mean that their gardens will not thrive and less food will be grown for their families. For farmers and market gardeners, this could have a serious economic impact.

Some weeds must be controlled because they are toxic. Livestock may be harmed if they ingest weeds such as cow cockle or sneezeweed. These types of plants can be serious problems if they're left to grow on rangelands.

It is the responsibility the landowner or gardener to identify noxious and prohibited noxious weeds and remove them from their properties. Failure to do so may, in some cases, result in a fine.



What is the best time to weed?



Weeding after a rain or if you've just watered the garden is a good practice. Weeds are easier to pull out of the ground when the soil is wet than when it is dry and hard. It means less work for you!

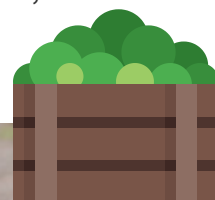
Pull weeds when they are young and small, before they've had a chance to establish their root systems or set seed.

Rather than waiting for the weeds to get out of hand and then attacking them all at once over many hours or even days, get in the habit of pulling a handful or two every time you take a walk through your garden. Another manageable option is to schedule two or three short weeding sessions per week. This will make the task less daunting and onerous.

Should weeds be thrown in the compost?

Because weeds can readily grow from seeds or, in some cases, from small chunks of roots, it's best to simply bag them up for garbage. If there is no chance that the weeds you are removing have set seed, and they do not propagate vegetatively, it is probably safe to compost them. Do not compost any plants that are diseased or infested with pests.

Do not leave weeds laying on the surface of the soil after you have pulled them. If they have seeds, new plants may start growing! Bag them up straightaway.



Mulch can help prevent weeds..



Mulch covers bare soil, so applying a 5-centimetre (2-inch) layer of clean straw or wood shavings around the plants in your edible garden will help discourage weeds from popping up.

Do not use hay mulch, as it tends to contain weed seeds and may exacerbate the problem.

Useful tools to use when weeding..

Hoe – Long-handled garden hoes can quickly dispatch weeds without much effort – and you can do the task while you're standing. They are best used to take out annual weeds before they set seed. The root systems of perennial weeds may be chopped into smaller bits by this tool, which doesn't eliminate them from the soil.

Weeding trowel – This short-handled garden tool is slightly different from an ordinary garden trowel. It has a narrow blade, which can be used to dig deep into the soil to help remove the roots of perennial weeds.

Dandelion digger – Available in either short- or long-handled styles, dandelion diggers have a specialized, split blade that is especially effective to lever weeds with taproots from the soil.

Hori hori knife – This combination of a knife and a trowel has its origins in Japan. The blade is serrated on one side and sharp on the other, which makes it a particularly useful and versatile digging tool.

Pruners – Pruners are essential to cut the flower heads from weed plants before they set seed. For this job, you can use either anvil or bypass pruners.



Methods to Control Weeds



Cutting or mowing weeds is one effective way of controlling those that spread via seed, such as annual weeds, but timing is everything. You must remove the flower heads before they form seeds. If there are only a few weeds, you can deadhead (trim away) the flower with a pair of pruners or scissors. A whole lawn of weeds – dandelions, for example – can be cut down with a lawn mower while the flowers are still in bloom. This method won't get rid of the weeds, but depending on the type of weed, it may slow or prevent reproduction.

Some gardeners till the soil to get rid of weeds. Tilling may be done by hand (often called double digging) or by using a machine. This method is useful to clear a large space, such as an in-ground vegetable bed, in a relatively short period of time. Unfortunately, tilling can bring weed seeds that are deep in the soil up to the surface, where they receive the sunlight and water they need to break dormancy and germinate. If there are perennial weeds in the soil, tilling can break the roots but not remove them, which may result in the propagation of more plants. The no-till versus till debate is ongoing among gardeners, and the choice to undertake one method over the other is a personal one.

Removing seeds by hand can be tedious and laborious, but it is also very effective if done properly. The key is to remove all of the root system of the weed, not to break the plant off at the surface of the soil. If using a trowel or digging tool for assistance, be careful not to disturb the roots of nearby plants that you are cultivating.

If you have plenty of time and you have a large space filled with weeds (or even turfgrass) that you want to get rid of, you can lay down a thick layer of cardboard or newspapers and cover them with wood chip mulch to keep the materials from blowing away. Over the course of several months, the weeds beneath the paper will perish from lack of sunlight, water, and nutrients. You can then remove the mulch and use it elsewhere in the garden. Beneath the partially-decomposed cardboard or newspaper (which can be shredded and composted), you're left with a weed-free area that you can prepare as a garden bed.

An alternative to this method is to lay down clear plastic sheeting instead of cardboard or newspapers, and tack it down with landscape pegs. Over time, heat from the sun will "cook" the weeds and unsprouted weed seeds beneath the plastic. This is called solarization. The biggest drawback with these two methods is the time it takes to complete the process – to be successful, you need to allow the coverings to sit for at least one growing season.

One of the most important things to remember about weeding your edible garden is that it is an ongoing task. It's not a chore that you do once and then never have to think about it again. By using these tips, you'll make the job less discouraging and more manageable, and the plants in your garden will thank you for it!

