WHAT IS A WEED?

"An out of place plant." W.J. Beal, weed specialist

"A plant that grows so luxuriantly or plentifully that it chokes out all other plants that possess more valuable . . . properties." W.W. Brenchley, weed expert

"A plant growing where it is not desired." The Terminology Committee of the Weed Society of America

". . .plant(s) not valued for use or beauty, growing wild and rank. . .hindering the growth of superior vegetation." The Oxford English dictionary

"It is, however, Ralph Waldo Emerson's definition of a weed as: "a plant whose virtures have not yet been discovered."

" Any undesired, uncultivated plant, especially one growing in profusion so as to crowd out a desired crop, or disfigure a lawn etc. New World dictionary.

"A weed is any plant that is somewhere it is not wanted. All plants serve a purpose, either in the food chain or in erosion control, but when they grow where we do not want them to grow, we consider them weeds." From a Gardener's Companion by Master Gardeners of Fresno County.

Instead of saying, "Life is what's happening when you are making other plans", I say, "Weeds are what's happening when you are making other plans." Me

The following facts are biological characteristics give weeds very definite survival advantages:

- They are huge seed producers.
- They have two types of dormancy that allows them to survive even if plants are eradicated several years in a row.
- Their seeds can survive for many years; many common weeds will germinate after 20 years.

University of California Cooperative Extension encourages gardeners to consider the following:

1. Prevention: If the garden is weed free now, persist in preventing weeds from coming in. Be aware of weeds when they emerge so you can interrupt their cycle before they flower and set seed. Avoid bringing in weed infested plants from a nursery or a gift plant or on garden equipment that may have seeds or dirt. Bringing in fresh manure from a field or pasture in loaded with seed.

2. Keep Garden Plants Competitive: Provide conditions that favor the crop and not the weed. Drip irrigation wets a small are, for example, providing water only to the desired plants.
3. Mechanical Control: Use tools to attack weeds before they go into seed. Consider mowing or rototilling them. Frequent hand removal of weed sprouts will rapidly reduce annual weeds. Perennials can be spread by cultivation and should be removed by other methods.
4. Soil solarization: This is an effective method to kill weed seeds by heating the soil. Till the area to be solarized, rake it smooth, soak well and then cover well with a 4 mil clear plastic. Make sure the area stays moist and the plastic is well sealed at edges.
5. Other cultural weed control methods include flaming, flooding, and crop rotation with frequent tillage.
6. Biological control: Using natural enemies to control weeds has been very effective on a few species. For example, Puncture vine is a weed that has been suppressed by the importation of a seed weevil and a stem weevil.
7. Chemical control: In extreme cases weeds can get the best of any gardener and an herbicide may be the solution. There are many types and some work on some weeds and in some planting situations and not others. Be sure and read labels and follow the recommendations exactly. There are pre-emergent and post-emergent herbicides, contact and systemic herbicides, and selective and non-selective herbicides.

Even having said all this, weeds are a part of the natural succession of plant ecosystems, even when in artificially made ecosystems. The goal of a gardener is to interrupt the natural succession to maintain a garden of ornamental plants. To do that, one must use a variety of weed control techniques over a long period of time.

The greatest single defense is to know your weeds! Identify them, know their characteristics, growth patterns and habits and what they need to survive. The information you gain can be used to better regulate them.

A future column will be forthcoming on weed identification.

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