

Weeds in the Vegetable Garden

What is a Weed?

A plant in the wrong place.

An undesirable plant - some, especially poisonous plants can be unsafe – others are not necessarily very harmful, but still undesirable in the garden.

A major challenge of weeds is that they have similar needs to the plants we *want* to grow and they compete with our plants for things like space, water, nutrients, and sunlight. Some weeds attract harmful insects that will easily move to the vegetable plants.

People frequently have different definitions of weeds. For example, some “weeds” are edible, but many people might not eat them.

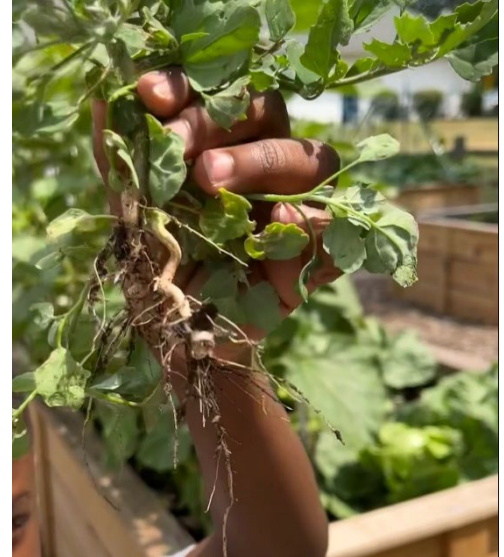
Two examples are dandelions and lambs quarters. Other plants might be considered either a wildflower or weed. For example, some people call wild violets weeds in the lawn, while others call them wildflowers and use them for beautification and enjoy their edible flowers.

The Best Weed Control is Prevention

Limit adding weeds by making sure transplants (seedlings), or grass or hay mulch, or soil or compost is not already weedy before using in the garden.

Mulch is a great way to control weeds and define where you can walk in the garden. There are different ways to mulch but a very effective way is to use old newspapers and thin layer of mulch such as grass clippings or straw (note: only use grass clippings from lawns that have not been treated with any chemicals).

How to mulch with newspaper: use about four sheets of newspaper, lay them down around the vegetable plants but not over them. Dampen the paper by dunking it quickly in a bucket of water or use a light spray from the hose. The wet paper will lay in the garden and not blow away. Overlap the paper throughout the garden – if there are “cracks” or gaps, the weeds will find their way through. Once the paper is laid, cover the top with a thin layer of mulch. This will help keep the paper in place during the garden season. The paper and mulch will help block out the sunlight, one of the things needed for any plants (including weeds) to grow.



Control Weeds as Early as Possible

First, identify the plant. Especially when vegetable plants are small, it might be hard to tell them apart from weeds. Some of the reasons people might choose to plant vegetable seeds in straight, labeled rows of plants or on a square-foot grid is to be able to tell the weeds apart from the vegetable plants. If a plant is growing where you didn't plant it, it is likely a weed, and you can remove it when it's small.

Remove Weeds

The oldest form of weed control is pulling the unwanted plants by hand. The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service and Slow Food USA offer some tips:

- When pulling the weed from the soil, hold close to the base to remove the entire plant including the root.
- Depending on your garden, you might use a garden tool like a hoe or hand trowel. Use high quality, ergonomically designed tools to lesson physical strain on your body.
- When using tools like a hoe, shave off the weeds near the soil surface when they are still small (less than 2 inches), and gently break the crust of the soil. Digging too deep could injure vegetable plant roots and also turn up a fresh supply of weed seeds.
- Remove weeds before they flower in order to prevent them from going to seed. If there are no flowers or seeds, you may leave the pulled weeds on the edge of the garden to dry out and become mulch. If there are already flowers and seeds, throw the pulled weeds away.

Weeding with Youth

Young children can certainly work in the garden, but weeding may or may not be a feasible garden chore. If children are not old enough to identify and understand that weeds are different than vegetable plants, wait until they're a little more experienced before pulling weeds out of the ground.

Focus on the identification and characteristics of a single plant and direct the youth to only removed that plant during the weeding activity.

Keep chore time short. Although some gardeners find weeding relaxing, not everyone does. Make a game of weeding (like who can pull five weeds, roots and all?) or limit weeding to five or ten minutes depending on the garden, number of youth and space.

Resources:

The National Gardening Association has an online Weed Identification and Control Library with photos and recommendations for the most common weeds found in lawns and gardens

<https://garden.org/learn/library/weeds/>

Michigan State University Extension has an online turf weed page with photos and descriptions

<https://www.canr.msu.edu/turf/weeds>

Bennet, Pamela, and Maria Zampini. Garden-pedia: An A-to-Z Guide to Gardening Terms. Pittsburg: St. Lynn's Press, 2015.

Home Vegetable Gardening in Kentucky. <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/ID/ID128/ID128.pdf>

Top 10 Ways to a Better Veggie Garden, Ohio State University Extension by Eric Barrett