



Weeds: Off to a Good Start

By J. Laughman, UConn Home and Garden Center

As daffodils and crocus appear, buds swell on the maples and golden forsythia shout spring's true arrival, gardeners also note the appearance of those pesky additions to the garden beds: weeds. AA Milne, author of Winnie the Pooh stories, noted that "weeds are flowers too, once you get to know them." Many weeds do indeed produce beautiful flowers as they mature, but that also can be their down side. Those flowers produce seeds that guarantee more weeds in following seasons.

What's a gardener to do? Part of the spring ritual of tidying up annual and perennial beds includes pruning summer-flowering shrubs such as nepeta and spirea, and pulling weeds that have survived late winter weather. One of the best times to tackle weed removal is early spring, just as the soil thaws, sunlight grows stronger and longer, and moisture from rain loosens up the soil. Weeds rooted in moist soil have a more tentative hold on the soil making them easy to remove. Most have flower buds that are still tight and gardeners are anxious to prepare for the coming blast of color from spring-blooming plants and shrubs. Hand-pulling is preferable to using herbicides that may damage tender foliage and roots on awakening plants. It also helps get those creaky joints back in shape and ready for sustained gardening.

Weeds that are among the most common in early spring include whitlowgrass, whose flowers are just emerging, and bittercress, already in flower. Another recognizable spring “weed” is the chickweed.



1Young Whitlowgrass



Whitlowgrass with flower stalk

Whitlowgrass, (*Draba verna*), is a member of the mustard family (Brassicaceae) and is related to arugula, kale and cabbage. Individual plants grow from a central point forming a rosette of leaves that are spear shaped, smooth edged and somewhat hairy. Stems that carry the flowers are leafless and usually hairless. White flowers are small (about 1/8" across), usually have 4 white petals that are deeply separated. The blooming period occurs intermittently from early to mid-spring and lasts about 3-4 weeks. The root system has fine fibers and is shallow, which makes it easy to remove from loamy soil. The plant usually flowers from March through May and drops its seeds in mid-to- late April. Seeds remain dormant for 3 months in the soil until the fall when they germinate. The plant itself is active during spring then disappears during summer.



Hairy Bittercress

Hairy bittercress (*Cardamine hirsute*) also belongs to the mustard (Brassicaceae) family. Its name belies its mild peppery flavor and tender leaves. Added to other salad microgreens it provides vitamin C, calcium, magnesium and has antioxidant properties. It is a winter annual that takes advantage of warming and moist soil to proliferate in early spring, but it is found throughout the whole growing season. The plant forms a dense rosette pattern of leaves at the base. Each stem has 1-3 leaflets with a larger terminal leaf. Leaves are sometimes described as kidney- or heart-shaped. The leaf edge may be slightly toothed or have a few small lobes. The leaf surface is often hairy – or hirsute. Four-petaled white flowers form clusters at the top of a smooth erect stem. Seeds form tight capsules. When mature, the pods will respond to a light touch or breeze and explode sending seeds to form new plants far from the mother plant. A fine, shallow and many-branched root system makes the plant easy to hand weed. Due to its easy propagation this plant adapts to any moist area. It is often found in nursery container plantings, in greenhouses and forming large mats in turf grass.



Mouse-ear Chickweed

Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium vulgatum*) is a ground-hugging winter annual that is also common in turf grass. It closely resembles Common Chickweed (*Stellaria media*) in its growing habits. There are several differences between the two types of chickweed that make them easier to tell apart. The mouse-ear variety has fuzzy stem and leaf surfaces. Stems can root at the stem nodes or joints, which helps form characteristic dense mats. Oval leaves grow oppositely along the stem, and hairs appear all along the stem. Petals on the clusters of white flowers are deeply notched often making it look like there are 10 petals. Roots are shallow allowing for easy hand pulling. Propagation is by seeds and rooted stems. It blooms from March to August. Common chickweed leaves are smooth, have a pointed tip and can have hairs near the base of the leaf. Leaves also appear opposite along the stem. Common chickweed stems can have one line of hairs only along the side. It tolerates low temperatures allowing it to grow and propagate under snow cover, making an early appearance from January to March.

Weeds are a perennial part of the natural world. They are best managed early in the growing season to prevent seeds from forming new plants next spring and taking over your flower beds or lawn. If you have questions about weed management or other gardening topics, please contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home and Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.