



Wicked Wild Weeds

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Weeds are the bane of every gardener. Unfortunately, it is our cultural practices that many times make a very inviting home them. So many times, people think about weeds during the peak of summer, when they are up to their ears in them. I spend very little time weeding, yet I grow a large array of crops. It all starts back at the beginning, before you set foot in the garden. With a little planning and forethought, you can spend more time enjoying your hobby, and less time weeding!

Many times people will till their soil at the beginning of the season. While this may make the soil light and airy, interrupt pest life cycles, and turn under current weeds, it also brings weed seeds to the surface. We end up with a clean slate for planting, but a serious weed infestation later in the season. If left unattended, weeds will outgrow many crops, or at least stunt their growth by competing for nutrients. If there are not many weeds on the surface, then maybe forgo the tilling and pull the weeds. You will be better off in the long run.



Author's garden with lettuce and peas – and some sprouting weeds. Photo by mrl2021

The best thing you can do after planting your crops is mulching the garden bed. You need to put a thick layer on or the weeds will simply push right up through. There are debates over what is the best mulch, but I find that any mulch is better than no mulch – use what is readily available. You want to avoid anything that may harbor weed seeds (like fresh hay). I find mulch is best used around larger plants like tomatoes, eggplants, or summer squash. The reason mulch works is because it is generally an inhospitable place for plant growth, and blocks out light for the weeds, and denies them access to the soil. It also has the added benefit of holding in moisture for the crop plants.

An alternative to weeding is to leave the ground bare. The trick here is to hoe up the ground frequently between your crop plants. I used this method for closely planted crops like lettuce, peppers, and garlic. There are many different styles and designs of hoes, but I prefer a stirrup hoe. This slides across the surface and cuts off the weeds. Some people will recommend hoeing every day. By all means, if you have the time and inclination, do so, but for me once a week is sufficient. If you let the weeds go too long, the stems get too thick and the hoes will not work very well.



Stirrup hoe. Photo by mrl2021

During the growing season, it is common for us to fertilize our plants. It is important to make sure the fertilizer gets to your crops, and not the weeds. If you have mulched, try to avoid putting your fertilizer on the mulch. If you do, you will make a nice place for weeds to grow. Instead, scrape away the mulch when fertilizing around your plants. The fertilizer should come in contact with the soil, and then be covered back up with mulch. If you are using liquid fertilizer, then try not to soak the mulch, but rather the base of the plant you are watering.

During the growing season it will be necessary to pull some weeds. Just remember that when you pull out a weed, soil will come to the surface and be spread onto your mulch layer. This is now an inviting place for weeds to grow. Better to add some mulch to those areas that have exposed soil. Another thing to consider is what species of weed you are pulling out. There are some weeds, like mugwort, that are perennial (come back each year), and have long roots that send new plants out far and wide. You want to make sure you pull out as much of the roots as possible. There are also mustard-type weeds that go to seed rather quickly. Get to these too late and the damage has already been done in the form of many little tiny seeds now sitting in your garden bed waiting for the ideal time to germinate. Some weeds may be on Connecticut's invasive species list. These should be handled carefully due to their ability to spread. Although I do compost my weed remains, I do not use that compost in the garden for fear of spreading any weed seeds or perennial roots into my growing area.

Two other anti-weed tricks are using a silage tarp to heat kill the weeds. Put the black side up, and the sun will heat up and kill any weeds underneath. The heat and warmth encourages weed seeds to germinate, only to be killed by the lack of light. Finally, consider putting a cover crop in at the end of the season to prevent weeds from gaining a foothold. These plants hold on to nutrients and generally prevent weeds from growing.

So, there are my tricks for outsmarting the weeds. I hope this helps you spend more time enjoying your garden and less time working in it. Don't forget to get a soil test to help dial in the proper growing parameters so all your efforts turn into time well spent!

For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.