

# Weeds *a common sense guide*



Weeds are an index of what is wrong - and sometimes what is right - with the soil.



— Charles Walters Jr  
*Weeds: Control Without Poison*

Receive a free e-newsletter with helpful tips on home and garden care!

#### To subscribe:

**Call:**  
360-867-2674 or  
(TTY) 1-800-833-6384

**Email:**  
healthyhomes@  
co.thurston.wa.us

**Weeds annoy us by thriving where they're not wanted. It may seem that two pop up for every one we pull. But there are many effective ways to tackle weeds without resorting to toxic chemicals. Learn to outsmart weeds the safe way, without herbicides. You'll be helping to protect the health of our soil, water, wildlife, pets, and families.**

## Step 1: Prevention – The Best Management

### Use plants to fight weeds

**Plant fast-growing plants** in shrub beds to fill in the space between slow-growing shrubs. Examples: kinnikinnick, farewell to spring, and scarlet flax.

**Space plants closely** to crowd out weeds.

**Plant a cover crop** in vegetable gardens, such as crimson clover or winter rye, in the fall. In early spring, dig the plants into the soil.

### Limit sources of weeds

**Keep weed seeds out** of your garden by choosing seeds, soil, and mulch from reliable sources. Make sure manure has been “hot composted” to kill weed seeds.

**Inspect nursery plants** to make sure they don't contain weeds. Before introducing a plant to your garden, ask if it is a type that spreads and takes over.

**Learn your plants' fertilizer needs.** Over-fertilizing encourages weeds. Test your soil to determine what and how much you need.

### Limit how much you work the soil.

Every time soil is turned over, weed seeds are brought near the surface where they can sprout. If you do turn your soil, apply mulch immediately to smother weed seeds. Or, wait about four days and hoe shallowly (1/2 inch) to kill sprouting weeds.

### Mulch, mulch, mulch

Mulch is any protective substance that covers the soil. Mulch smothers weed seeds by limiting light.

Place mulch between plants and over unused areas. Mulch four inches deep in garden beds around plants but not against the stem. Use two inches around shallow-rooted plants such as rhododendrons and azaleas. To further cut off weeds, use a base layer under the mulch.

**Base layer** – includes cardboard, newspaper (thick and overlapped), and landscape fabric. Take care using landscape fabric because many kinds do not break down and become tangled with roots. Perennials such as thistles may still pop up through these layers, so also plan to hand weed.

**Mulch** – includes sawdust (alder works well), wood chips, shredded bark, shredded yard prunings, pine needles, and old cedar shavings (which are naturally weed-repellent).

### Watch where you water

**Install soaker hoses or drip irrigation**, so plants are watered, not paths or weeds! Bury soaker hoses three inches deep in soil or mulch to reach plant roots.

## Step 2: Assess the Weed

Identify the weed to plan an effective control strategy. Is it an annual, which dies down each year and only spreads by seeds (such as chickweed)? Is it a biennial, completing its life cycle in two growing seasons (such as mullein)? Is it a perennial that grows for many years, and reproduces mainly by seeds but also stores food in its roots (such as dandelions)? Or a perennial that spreads by seeds and creeping (such as buttercup or blackberry)? For weed identification, contact WSU Extension's Master Gardeners at 360-867-2163 or Noxious Weed Control at 360-786-5576, or visit

[www.thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/public-works/noxious-weeds](http://www.thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/public-works/noxious-weeds)

## Step 3: Assess the Site

Why are weeds present? Weeds generally grow where the soil is disturbed or where desired plants are doing poorly. Find plants suited to the amount of sunshine, type of soil, and amount of care you can give. Get the *Common Sense Gardening Plant List* and *Plan Before You Plant* (see “For More Information” below).

### Weeding Tips:

- It's easier to pull up weeds in damp soil.
- Weed forks make it easier to pull weeds with long tap roots, such as dandelions and Canada thistles (a screwdriver also works).
- To save your back, try one of the long-handled weed pullers with foot pedals or hand triggers.
- In lawns, sprinkle grass seeds in the holes left by removing weeds and cover with 1/2" of soil.
- Dig or cut perennial weeds just before they bloom, when their food reserves – and ability to regrow – are lowest.

**For more information** on weeds or to receive free or alternative format copies of Common Sense Gardening guides, call 360-867-2674 or TDD/TTY 1-800-833-6384 or visit [www.thurstoncommunitygardens.org](http://www.thurstoncommunitygardens.org)

### Follow us on Social Media:

Facebook: @ThurstonHealth  
Instagram: @ThurstonHealth  
Twitter: @ThurstonHealth

Printing supported in part by the Washington State Department of Ecology Local Solid Waste Financial Assistance Program.

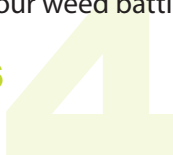


Printed on recycled paper

Updated March 2023

What level of weeds are you comfortable with? What is it about the weeds that bothers you? Many weeds have good qualities, such as attracting birds and beneficial insects, improving the soil, and attractive flowers. Pick your weed battles!

## Step 4: Assess Your Options



**Hand pulling and hoeing:** Hand pulling is very effective for annual weeds before they set seed. It is not as effective for weeds that regrow from root fragments. Use hoes to chop and scrape out seedling weeds, exposing roots to the drying action of the sun.

**Mowing:** Repeated mowing of perennials, such as Canada thistle, depletes the food reserves stored in plants' roots. It takes persistence – mowing every few weeks during the growing season for at least three years! Mow lawns at least 2 inches high so grass will shade out weeds.

**Heat:** Heat kills weeds. Boiling water from a teakettle can be poured on weeds popping through cracks in the driveway or patio. Propane torches work to flame tough weeds. Technique is important, as it's the heat, not actual burning, that kills the plant. Check nurseries, hardware stores, or catalogs for flame weederes.

**Corn gluten:** This natural nontoxic product keeps seeds from growing roots, and as it decomposes it adds nitrogen to the soil. Use after preparing a garden bed or spread over an established lawn. It is effective against crabgrass, dandelions, and other weeds, but does not harm soil organisms and other creatures. Do not use on newly seeded areas. Corn gluten is available at many garden centers.

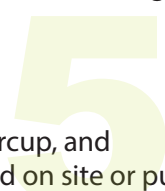
**Chemical controls:** The use of herbicides in home gardens is usually unnecessary. Stormwater washes toxic chemicals down storm drains into streams, lakes, ponds, Puget Sound, and groundwater (our source of drinking water). As a last resort, spot applications of herbicides are safer for the environment than broadcast applications. The warning labels on weed and bug killers carry legal definitions:

"caution" = moderately toxic  
"warning" = very toxic  
"danger" = extremely toxic

Always read and carefully follow label directions. Visit [www.growsmartgrowsafe.org](http://www.growsmartgrowsafe.org) to find least-toxic products. For weed-specific strategies visit our website and look for Integrated Pest Management (IPM). Thurston County's IPM policy for properties it manages says chemicals will be used only when no other control methods would be effective or practical, and that if and when they are used, they will be the least toxic available.

**Avoid "weed & feed" products:** These usually are a mix of herbicide and quick-release fertilizer. Professional landscapers avoid these products because most of the herbicide is wasted. In addition, these chemicals may damage the health of your landscape, wash into local streams and groundwater, and get tracked inside.

## Step 5: Disposal



**Weeds** like dandelion, buttercup, and chickweed can be composted on site or put in your yard waste bin.

**Problem weeds** like English ivy, blackberry, and morning glory are invasive and can't go in the yard waste bin. These weeds can be disposed of as garbage or can be dried out on a tarp or black garbage bag, and once fully dried, composted on site. Monitor the compost area to ensure plants do not re-root.

**Noxious weeds** threaten the health of the environment and the economy. Tansy ragwort, common fennel, spurge laurel, poison hemlock, and some knapweeds are examples. Don't put these in your yard waste bin or compost. These weeds can be disposed of as garbage for free at the Thurston County Waste and Recovery Center or at the Rainier and Rochester Drop Box Facilities.

Visit [www.thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/public-works/noxious-weeds](http://www.thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/public-works/noxious-weeds) or call the **Solid Waste Hotline at 360-867-2491** for more information on which noxious weeds qualify for free disposal and tips on how to compost the rest. The **Thurston County Waste and Recovery Center** is located at 2420 Hogum Bay Road NE, Lacey, and is open daily, 8 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.

Thurston County Public Health  
and Social Services Department  
Environmental Health  
412 Lilly Road NE  
Olympia, WA 98506-5132  
[www.thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/public-health-and-social-services](http://www.thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/public-health-and-social-services)

