

# REDUCING PESTICIDES

it's perfectly natural.



## TACKLING WEEDS ORGANICALLY

Unfortunately, all gardens get weeds. Although many gardening books pretend that weeds don't exist (for they rarely mention them), there are literally thousands of plants that we consider undesirable for our gardens. Even the smallest city plot will occasionally play host to a few annoying weeds.

The trick to getting rid of these annoying interlopers without using harmful pesticides is to deal with them early, before they get established and out of control. These are three basic kinds of weeds – annuals, biennials and perennials.

**Annual Weeds** – These appear in the spring, live over one summer and then die. Because they don't have time to develop large root systems, most can be pulled out easily. However, annual weeds produce mindboggling numbers of seeds, which leads to more weeds the following year. The most common annual weeds include:

Annual sow thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*)  
Chickweed (*Stellaria media*)  
Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*)  
Knot grass (*Polygonum aviculare*)  
Pigweed (*Chenopodium album*)  
Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*)

Ragweed (*Ambrosia artemisiifolia*)  
Smartweed or lady's thumb (*Polygonum persicaria*)  
Many Grasses  
Wild cucumber vine (*Echinocystis lobata*)

**Biennial Weeds** – These start to grow one year, storing food in a long tap root. They then grow rapidly the following year, producing many flowers and seeds. The plant then dies. They are easiest to pull out when very young or when the flowers are finishing. Major biennial weeds include:

Burdock (*Arctium minus*)  
Garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*)

Queen Anne's lace (*Daucus carota*)

**Perennial Weeds** – These can live for years, often developing massive root systems that are difficult to dig out completely. The ones most likely to be found in city gardens include:

Bedstraw (*Gallium*)  
Bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*)  
Bittersweet or climbing nightshade (*Solanum dulcamera*)  
Creeping bell-flower (*Campanula rapunculoides*)  
Dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*)  
Dock (*Rumex*)

Dog strangling vine or black swallow wort (*Vincetoxicum nigrum*)  
Ground ivy or creeping Charlie (*Glechoma hederacea*)  
Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriac*)  
Some perennial grasses  
Yellow sorrel (*Oxalis*)



This fact sheet has been prepared by the Toronto Master Gardeners



### **Tips for getting rid of weeds organically**

- Weed after it rains. When the ground is moist, but not soggy, it is much easier to pull weeds out.
- Weed early in the early spring when the plants are in their fastest growth phase.
- Watch for the weeds' flowers which are often tiny. Always try to get rid of weeds before flowers fall off and seeds form.
- Hoes and other similar garden tools cut weeds off at the ground and are good for new weeds around other plants. Bear in mind that this doesn't remove the roots so it is more effective for annual weeds.
- With dandelions and other perennial weeds try to dig out the entire root. There are some good dandelion diggers on the market to help with the task.
- Don't put weeds that are about to go to seed into the compost. In the spring, newly-sprouted annual weeds can be composted.
- Weeds in cracks between paving stones can often be killed with a kettle of boiling water – but watch your feet when pouring on the water!
- A spray of acetic acid (at least 20% solution) will kill many weeds (and good plants as well). Regular household vinegar isn't strong enough. Garden centres are starting to sell environmentally-friendly products that contain acetic acid. The 20% acetic acid solution can also be found in hardware stores, renovation centres, and agricultural supply stores.
- Commercially available fatty acid sprays will kill the leaves (but not roots) of most plants. Effective for annual weeds, but spray carefully since it also kills good plant leaves.
- Be careful when you buy topsoil, it can sometimes introduce undesirable weeds.
- Smother large areas of weeds with a thick black plastic spread over the ground. Leave the plastic down for at least two months to kill weeds properly. Many gardeners put such coverings down in the early fall and then remove them in the spring.

### **Controlling weeds with corn gluten**

Corn gluten meal is a 100% natural and harmless product that can be helpful to control weeds in lawns. It won't kill established weeds, but it does stop seeds from germinating. It must be applied in early spring, 3 – 5 weeks before weeds start appearing. In the Toronto area, this is just as the forsythia starts to bloom.

The corn gluten needs to be spread evenly on the lawn. It can also be used in cracks between paving stones. If the weather does not stay dry for a few days after applying the corn gluten, you may need to reapply it. Corn gluten meal is sold in some garden centres and in stores carrying environmentally-friendly products.

### **For further information**

Weeds of Canada and the Northern United States, by Frace Royer and Richard Dickinson, published by Lone Pine Publishing, contains colour pictures of all common weeds, along with detailed information about where and how they grow.