

Deep in the weeds?

We'll help you get out!



Weed is a word that only brings joy to hippies and potheads. Gardeners? Not so much! While we welcome the cooler weather and the first sprinkling of rain, June also sees an explosion of weeds in our gardens. Weeds are the gatecrashers of the gardening world. They arrive with no invitation, help themselves to nutrients and drinks, and devolve into an unsightly mess. If you are struggling to keep them out, don't despair because MARKtoe! is here to help you cope.

By Anna Mouton

The social media system for dealing with weeds

Plants are like people on Facebook: there are some that you would love to have as a friend, but they ignore all your requests. Others pop up out of nowhere and want to like your garden. Sometimes these may end up being fantastic plants. But many turn out to be weeds. Luckily, getting rid of them is easy once you match the correct strategy to each type of weed.

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Unfollow annual weeds

Annuals are plants that complete their life cycle in one year. In winter rainfall areas, annuals usually germinate in late autumn or early winter. They grow during the wet season and flower in late winter and early spring. Once annuals have dispersed their seeds, they die. The seeds remain in the soil during the hot, dry days of summer, ready to start the cycle again next winter.

The good news about annuals is that they die young. The bad news is that they produce thousands of seeds. Part of this year's seed crop will germinate for years to come until the seed bank in the soil is depleted. Hence the old saying: one year's seeding makes seven years' weeding. Some common weeds have seeds that remain viable for decades, however, most seeds seem to germinate in their first season.

If you don't want to see an annual plant's updates in your garden year after year, unfollow them! Mow them down. Or stop them from posting seeds by removing them mechanically or chemically. We'll explain how to do it.



Unfriend biennial and perennial weeds

Biennial plants usually live for two years whereas perennials persist for many seasons. Like annuals, they may seed around your garden. They also spread vegetatively – for example by sending out roots and shoots to make new plants. Many perennials can grow again from root fragments and some have tough, deep roots. They can even come back to life after a spell in the compost heap.

Although perennials may form seeds, they don't usually produce as many as annuals do, so fewer new plants appear in the garden every year. The downside? You have to be brutal in getting rid of existing plants. If you don't unfriend them once and for all, they will keep showing up in your garden. Dig up every part of these weeds and don't put the remains on your compost heap. Persistent perennial weeds usually need chemical treatment.

Block weeds from your feed

You've eradicated unwanted plants from your garden and it's time to enjoy peace and order. You head outdoors with a cup of tea – and you're ambushed by a weed that you thought was gone! Some plants just can't take a hint. The only way to deal with them is to block them.

Weeds seize any opportunity to invade your garden. Seeds germinate in open, disturbed soil (weeds struggle to become established among other strong plants). Perennial weeds usually hitch a ride via containers of ornamental plants or in compost and mulches. Some perennials drop in from the neighbourhood, sending runners under the fence, especially if your next-door neighbours aren't as discerning about their garden as you are.

Don't give weeds any chance to settle in. It's far easier to prevent an infestation of weeds than to eradicate them after they've made themselves at home. We'll discuss ways to block weeds.

1. Dandelion clocks look pretty, but can spread seeds all over your garden.
2. Grubbing up weeds by hand is one of the best control methods.
3. If life hands you annual weeds: make compost!

Waging a turf war on weeds

Death by fork and hoe

The simplest and most effective way to destroy a weed is to pull it out of the soil completely. If it resists, use a fork or another tool. Be sure to remove the roots or the plant may regrow. Get to annuals before they flower and begin to set seed. Failing that, put plants that are already seeding in the bin and not on your compost heap. Perennial roots and stems are also best binned to prevent regrowth.

Weed seedlings are more vulnerable than adult plants. Wholesale slaughter is possible by hoeing them down. A hoe is a blade on a long handle. You pull or push it along the ground, cutting through the stems of young weeds at the root level. Unlike using a rake or fork, a hoe doesn't bring dormant seeds to the soil surface. You can hoe between vegetables and ornamental plants without damaging them.

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Weeds growing in an area with paving or gravel can be destroyed by using heat. The scary-sounding flame gun for weed control is actually nothing more than a paraffin or propane torch. Electrical equivalents are also available. These kill weeds by singeing them. Flame guns are effective and environmentally friendly, as long as you don't start a fire that burns down your entire garden. Not recommended for use where there are flammable materials close by.

Chemical warfare

Chemical weed killers (herbicides) have been around for decades. Glyphosate – best known under the trade name Roundup – was first marketed in 1974. Hundreds of thousands of tonnes of glyphosate is sprayed all over the world every year to kill various undesirable plants. Unsurprisingly, given these volumes, residues of glyphosate are turning up in food, river systems, and even wine. You will find heated debates on the safety of glyphosate and other herbicides on the internet and in the media.

Weed killers like glyphosate kill all plants. They are called non-selective herbicides. Spray it on when there is no wind on a still day to avoid drift that will damage your ornamentals. Selective herbicides only kill certain types of plants. For instance, the product 2,4-D or formulas with dicamba affect broadleaved weeds but not grass. Such selective herbicides are often marketed for clearing weeds from lawns.

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Should you choose to use chemical weed killers, you will find them extremely effective for most weeds. They are especially useful for eradicating deep-rooted perennial weeds. Herbicides are likewise popular for maintaining hard surfaces such as paving and for clearing new planting areas. When preparing for a new planting, remove existing vegetation and then leave the ground fallow for several weeks. Spray emerging foliage to destroy lurking weeds.



Don't break new ground

Most soil contains weed seeds. One study found more than 30,000 seeds per square meter of land. The seeds in your garden are all waiting for their moments in the sun – don't let them have it! Every time you disturb the soil by digging or forking you will be turning up weed seeds. Adopt a no dig policy. Apply compost as a mulch on the surface of the soil. Earthworms and other soil critters will drag it down and work it in.

Seeds love loose soil in an open area so cover your soil up to discourage weeds from germinating. The best way is by applying a thick layer of mulch. Mulch can be anything from chippings or compost to gravel or peach pips. Besides suppressing weeds, mulch also keeps the soil moist and looks attractive. Organic mulches have the added advantage of improving soil quality over time. Resist the temptation to put down black plastic. Not only is plastic ineffective, it also becomes unsightly and pollutes the planet.

Healthy soil and strong plants fight off invasions better than poor soils and spindly plants. There are weeds that thrive in every condition: dry as dust, compacted as concrete, swampy as politics. You can't expect your flowers to fight it out in the trenches with weeds. Give ornamental plants good growing conditions and they will hold their own against the enemy.



1. Regular hoeing is great for controlling weeds in the vegetable patch.

2. Weed suppression is one of the many advantages of using mulch.

What comes next?

Now that you've bounced the weeds out of your garden party, you can enjoy the new life that comes with winter rains. Remember that winter is the active season in areas with Mediterranean climates – like most of the Cape region. Bulbs emerge and flowering annuals are starting up. Make sure you get outside and show your garden some love!

Next month MARKtoel will show you how to prune correctly for added structure and beauty in your garden.

Vegetables that can be sown now

Western Cape: broad beans, cabbage, carrots, celery, lettuce, parsnips, peas, radishes, spinach, turnips

Eastern Cape: bush beans, runner beans, beetroot, cabbage, carrots, peas, radishes, Swiss chard

Northern Cape: onions, peas



Common annual weeds

1. *Capsella bursa-pastoris* | Shepherd's purse
2. *Datura species* | Thorn apples or stinkweeds*
3. *Digitaria sanguinalis* | Crab finger-grass
4. *Medicago polymorpha* | Bur clover
5. *Nicandra physalodes* | Apple of Peru*
6. *Poa annua* | Annual meadow or winter grass
7. *Portulaca oleracea* | Common purslane
8. *Solanum* | Bitter apples*
9. *Stellaria media* | Chickweed*
10. *Taraxacum officinalis* | Common dandelion

*invasive species



1. Large seeds can be sown individually in modules.
2. Space brassicas widely to allow for plant growth.
3. Transplant seedlings as soon as they have two true leaves.
4. When sowing direct you may need to thin young plants to prevent crowding.
5. Cat's ear or false dandelion is a common perennial weed.
6. Ribwort plantain can be eaten and is said to have medicinal properties.

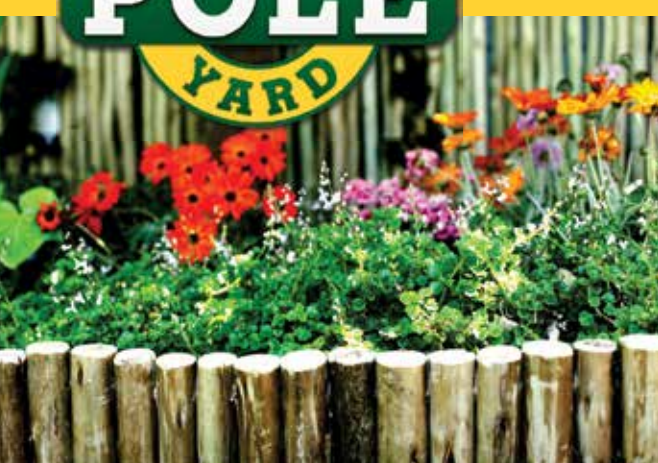
Common biennial and perennial weeds

1. *Cirsium vulgare* | Spear thistle*
2. *Cynodon dactylon* | Couch grass
3. *Cyperus esculentus* | Yellow nut-sedge
4. *Cyperus rotundus* | Nut grass
5. *Echium species* | Echium or bugloss*
6. *Hypochaeris radicata* | Cat's ear or false dandelion
7. *Nothoscordum x borbonicum* | Onion weed
8. *Plantago lanceolata* | Ribwort plantain
9. *Solanum species* | Bitter apples and bugweeds*
10. *Urtica dioica* | Stinging nettle

*invasive species

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