

KEEPING AHEAD OF THE WEEDS

Have a plan for dealing with weeds, keeping these principles in mind.

1. In spring, remove overwintering perennial weeds that are returning from large roots: thistles, dandelions, burdock, quack grass, etc. Use a digging fork or dandelion digger and get all the roots.
2. ALWAYS remove all the roots of weeds, don't just rip off the tops. Weeds regrow at a frightening rate and size from roots left in the ground.
3. Weed early and often. Keep it near the top of your "to do" list.
4. Try different tools until you find ones that you really like. Don't just keep using one just because it's what you have. Ask friends what their favorite weeding tool is and ask to try it out.
5. Weed early in the day when it is not going to rain. Leave the weeds drying on top of the soil. If you wish to compost them, let them dry down first, then gather up and put in compost. If freshly pulled weeds are left intact on top of moist soil at night, some of them will have pulled themselves up and started growing again by morning!
6. Keep your weeds from blooming! If you see flower buds forming, either pull the whole weed or at least cut off the budded up part. Do not compost! Many weeds will continue to bloom and set viable seeds, even if they are pulled up when only in bud. Some famous examples are: dandelions, thistles, garlic mustard, many grasses, velvetleaf, and teasel.
7. In late June and early July you will see a whole carpet of annual weeds coming up from seed, especially lambs quarters, pigweed, and grasses such as foxtail. You can either hoe them two or three times when they are small, or wait until they are a LITTLE bigger (6-8 inches tall) and then pull. The bigger ones may shade out the younger ones, making your job easier. Also the "corpses" of young weeds make excellent "green" or "sheet" compost. Just let them lie on the hot soil (remember: do your weeding in the morning!) and rot back into the ground. HOWEVER, it takes only a few days for these weeds to go from 6-8 inches to 2 foot tall, hard to pull monsters with seed heads on them. So beware. If you only get into the garden once in a while, weed those annuals out early on. Also, get ALL the weeds, not just the big ones. If you remove just big ones, you are removing competition for the little ones, and those will be just as big in another week as the ones you took out.
8. Once you have a small area weed free, do one of the following:
 - a. Mulch. My favorites are straw, pine needles, and decomposed leaves. My least favorite is wood chips or bark mulch (keeps soil too moist and robs nutrients from my plants). Do not buy mulch! It is often infested with jumping worms which will destroy your soil!
 - b. Fill in all weeded areas with other plants that you DO want to keep. Remember, "Nature abhors a vacuum". If you don't fill it with plants YOU want, Mother Nature will fill it with whatever is near at hand, usually weeds!
9. Pulling weeds is 1000 times easier if the soil is "soft" or damp. Ideally, we pull weeds 2 days after a good soaking rain or watering. In two days, the surface has dried up but the soil underneath is still moist, and the roots will slip out. There is nothing so frustrating as trying to pull weeds when the soil is rock hard. Give yourself a break: set a date to weed, then back up two days and water the area thoroughly (1/2 to 1 inch water).
10. We try not to use chemicals if possible. Save herbicides for the really nightmare weeds, that reproduce from every little piece of root or even leaf that is left behind: Canada thistle, quack grass, dandelion, and purslane. Herbicides are also sometimes the only answer for dealing with large areas of thistles and garlic mustard, or woody plants like buckthorn, Russian olive, and honeysuckle.