

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

May 13, 2024

Keeping Ahead of the Weeds

Now that we are well into May, everything is green and growing. Unfortunately, not all green growing plants are welcome, as among our desired plants are often weeds.

Weeds are simply plants out of place and compete for water, light, nutrients, and growing space. Weeds may interfere with use of an area or be unsightly. Certain unwanted species are typically labeled as weeds no matter where they grow. These include quackgrass, crabgrass, garlic mustard, ground ivy, and Canada thistle, among others.

Mechanical methods of removal, such as cultivating, hoeing, and of course, hand-pulling can all be effective. These practices need to be done early and often to stay ahead of weed progress. Use caution not to disrupt roots of desired plants and avoid bringing up soil from deep below, as more weed seeds may be brought up to the surface.

Mulching is a preferred weed control method, conserves soil moisture, and makes gardens more attractive. Perennial weed species existing on the site usually do not go away when covered with mulch, so remove them first.

Numerous organic mulches are available, most often consisting of some type of shredded bark material. With time mulches decompose and as they do so, may become a good medium for weeds to germinate.

Avoid this by replenishing mulches as needed and occasionally rake them.

Avoid using plastic mulch around landscape plantings, shrubs, and trees. It creates issues with oxygen and water movement when used for long time periods. Plastic mulch is suggested as seasonal use in vegetable gardens around warm-loving vegetable crops, however, including tomatoes, peppers, and melons.

Herbicides (weed killers) are another weed management tool. First, always read product labels to be certain the herbicide can be used on the planting or crops where the weeds are. Carefully read all application information, including rate and timing. Remember misapplied herbicides do not distinguish between weeds and desirable plants.

Preemergence herbicides, most often in granular form, kill weed seeds as they germinate and are applied to the soil. They will not control existing weeds. Postemergence herbicides, typically applied as a spray, may also be applied to soil, but more commonly are applied directly to existing weed plants. Label directions will indicate how to properly apply each type.

What about home-remedies using household chemicals for weed control? These products have not been evaluated and labeled as herbicides, thus are not necessarily "safer" to use in the environment. Even though you may read of someone using a "homemade" herbicide and saying it worked, be extremely cautious with these ideas.

