

Every Plant a Wanted Plant: Tips on Creating a Weed-free Landscape

-by Dennis "Whitey" Lueck (December 1997)

Eliminate sites that attract weeds: Because most weeds are Eurasian species that depend on sunny, open, "disturbed" sites to get a toehold, make every effort to eliminate such sites. Encourage shade and later successional stages by planting native deciduous trees and shrubs that will both create shade and provide a leaf mulch that prevents weed seeds from germinating. I.e., ensure that every square foot of soil is covered either with wanted plants or dead leaves.

Maintain a healthy ecosystem: Aim for ecological complexity that includes a variety of native plants that co-evolved and work together well, rather than relatively few species of exotic plants that have very limited ecological connections to one another. Use nearby natural areas as your instruction manual. Avoid pampering individual plants; even if you've done a good job of plant selection, some plants will die or fail to thrive, but their places should, over time, be taken by nearby desirable plants, rather than by weeds. If the *ecosystem* works to prevent weeds, then *you* won't have to!

Use neither weed killers nor bark mulch nor landscape cloth: Most of the benefits derived from the use of these products go to their manufacturers (as profits), not to the people who use them or to the plants. Moreover, they tend to create more problems than they solve. Even "selective" weed killers can kill beneficial plants, too. -- Bark mulch simply invites weeds by creating a suitable substrate for their germination. When you see weed-free bark mulch, it usually means the bark is relatively fresh, or it has been doused with herbicides to prevent weed growth. -- Although landscape cloth (unlike black plastic) is indeed permeable to both air and water, it still prevents the daily and seasonal movement of micro- and macro-organisms through the soil profile, thus impairing the overall health of the soil ecosystem and the plants that grow in that soil.

Learn to live with winter annuals: West of the Cascades here in the Northwest, our moist, mild winters provide ideal growing conditions for a variety of plants that germinate with the first fall rains, grow intermittently throughout the winter, then flower and set seed well before the summer drought begins. Examples include Eurasian species such as common groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*) and common chickweed (*Stellaria media*), as well as natives like western bittercress (*Cardamine oligosperma*) and the lovely candyflower (*Montia sibirica*). Because these plants are most prolific on disturbed sites, consider leaving them alone so they can help protect the soil through the winter and provide food for herbivorous (plant-eating) critters. Moreover, on most sites that remain undisturbed for several years, winter annuals tend to disappear since ecological succession favors the establishment of perennial plants. If you still choose to extirpate winter annuals, do so by pulling them before they set flowers and seeds, thus interrupting their life cycle in an effort to eliminate next year's seed source.

Maintain vigilance: Even persistent weeds like bindweed and Himalayan blackberry can eventually be eliminated by well-timed and regular removal of their above-ground parts, as well as by creating shade above them with an overstory of appropriate native shrubs or trees.



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