

Weed Control Made Earth-Friendly

Natural ways to help your customers keep weeds at bay.

WRITTEN BY AMY STEWART

A CUSTOMER CAME INTO PINK'S NURSERY asking for help in getting rid of crabgrass. She didn't want to use any chemicals, so Co-Owner Pat Murray helped her put together a good offensive plan that included preventative maintenance and healthy plants that choke out weeds. "She said, 'Thank you for listening. I feel like people just want to throw chemicals at me.' But that's not us," Murray says. "For every chemical solution, we have an organic or nonchemical solution."

At Pink's Nursery, organic weed control starts with a relaxed approach to weeds, and simple preventative strategies. Murray starts with the easiest techniques, like smothering the weeds with mulch, and offers an array of organic products and tools for stubborn problems.

What drives organic interests.

Many of her customers are motivated to use fewer chemicals out of concern for their pets' safety. "People talk more about their pets' health than their children!" Murray says.

They also want to eat healthier, and that starts with an organic garden.

Broader environmental concerns come into play, too. "I think people are starting to realize that what each one of us does has an impact on the earth," Murray says. "We can't pretend we're not having an impact anymore. So people want to know what small part they can do."

Most customers come into the garden center believing they only have two choices: pull weeds by hand or spray with synthetic chemicals. In fact, the options are not so black and white. Organic gardeners can employ preventative techniques, use some low-impact products and try tools that will make weed eradication efforts easier. Even gardeners who still want to use synthetic chemicals on the toughest weeds can try organic methods first, and bring in a synthetic spot treatment once or twice a year if they feel it is absolutely necessary.

But sometimes weed control isn't about the weeds at all.

"I love it when people come in, looking for something to spray on their weeds, and go home with a flat of plants instead," Murray says. "When people have an abundant, overflowing garden, there's not much room for weeds to get established."

By helping customers select tough, vigorous plants that will crowd out weeds, Murray turns a chore like weeding into a garden design project. Sometimes, a difficult

weedy spot can be transformed into a focal point - think pavers, fountains or benches.

She says, "If they're doing battle with the same weeds in the same spot every year, maybe it's time to invest in a complete renovation of that corner of the garden."

"IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE IN LINE WITH NATURE, you have to let nature be involved," says Mary Pat Murray, Co-Owner of Pink's Nursery in Clinton, CT. She advises customers to learn to tolerate a few weeds. "People have to realize that with organic measures, you're not going to be 100 percent weed-free. But you know what? Weeds are green, too. They're not that bad."

Weed Control Strategies for Gardeners

CROWD THEM OUT - Is it possible that, even though you think you need an herbicide, you would be better off buying another plant? Consider a vigorous competitor. A low-growing, creeping bloomer like hardy Geranium could crowd out weeds near an entryway, and a dense Juniper could be just the thing for adding a sturdy evergreen shape to a perennial border.

"This can really work in a perennial garden," says Pat Murray, Co-owner of Pink's Nursery in Clinton, CT. "I like Pachysandra or Ajuga, or maybe *Phlox subulata*. I also tell people to make sure there's always something in bloom, because then you don't notice the weeds as much."

Even the vegetable garden might benefit from some competition. Many organic gardeners add enough rich compost to allow them to plant veggies close together, making it harder for weeds to grow. Cover crops like vetch, rye or clover can be used to smother weeds during the off season, when vegetable or flower beds are dormant. They can also be used between the rows to hold soil in place, attract pollinators and fix nitrogen at the root zone.

TRY A HOME REMEDY - Ordinary white vinegar may not be the most expensive product, but it works. Undiluted vinegar with 5 percent or more acetic acid can be sprayed directly on weeds to knock them back - but you should know that the roots might not be controlled. Another easy strategy for keeping weeds out of the pavement and other hard surfaces, where nearby plants can't be damaged, is to pour boiling water over them. This is a great use for the hot water left over from boiling pasta or making tea.

TOLERATE SOME WEEDS - "People who are really adamant about going natural are going to have to tolerate some weeds," Murray says. "I tell them that it may take two or three years, and they're fine with that."

Remember, a weed is just a plant that hasn't been invited to the party. A little clover in the lawn is not the end of the world, and a few "volunteers" in the vegetable beds won't make the tomatoes taste any different. In fact, some weeds, including dandelions, attract beneficial insects that help pollinate crops and eat other bugs.

DON'T FEED THE WEEDS
- Gardeners who have constant problems with weeds in their flower beds may not realize how much they are fertilizing and watering those weeds. Try drip irrigation, which directs water at the plants you want to thrive while depriving the weeds. Apply liquid fertilizer to only the most desirable plants rather than spraying it over the entire garden. Scratch dry granular fertilizer around the roots of plants rather than applying it to every inch of bare soil.

SMOTHER WITH ORGANIC MATTER - Even gardeners who make their own compost may prefer to buy bagged compost and mulch products to smother weeds. After all, weed seeds can end up in the compost pile, making the homegrown version risky as a weed control strategy.

A layer of 3 to 4 inches of mulch may be the best way to keep weeds down in established beds. Remember that bark and wood products can deplete the soil of nitrogen as they decompose, so you should either use well-aged compost or add a supplemental organic nitrogen fertilizer.

But sometimes, compost isn't enough. Converting an existing lawn to a new flower bed or clearing a weed-covered lot may take extra effort. One popular strategy is a layering method that starts with chopping down vegetation with a string trimmer or mower, then covering it with a thick layer of cardboard or newspaper. (Three to four layers of overlapping cardboard or five to six newspaper sections work best.) Wet the paper to hold it in place, then start piling on layers of aged manure, grass clippings, dried leaves or other shredded garden waste. Top with a layer of finished compost or mulch. The pile should be 12 inches high or more. It will settle as it decomposes, and the cardboard or paper will smother the weeds. In a few months, you can plant directly into it with no digging at all.

SMOTHER WITH WEED BARRIERS

- Landscape fabrics and other synthetic weed barriers can suppress tough perennial weeds, although organic gardeners may not like the artificiality of a plastic barrier between them and the soil. But this method may be a good short-term solution to keep weeds down during the first year, while new plants get established.

Another option is to use clear plastic to “solarize” or heat-sterilize soil filled with weed seeds. But it has to stay on the ground for four to six weeks during the hottest part of the year to heat the soil enough to kill the weeds. Also, many of the beneficial microorganisms that live in the soil may be killed in the process.

“I have [gardeners] describe the area before I recommend mulch or landscape fabric,” Murray says. “We just had a customer with a commercial property with a flower bed in front. They wanted to just pull the weeds. With that kind of space, in full sun, I told them to go right to barrier. Even in our nursery, we will use an 8- by 10-foot pond liner as a weed barrier and just move it every two weeks. That kills them off.”

GRAB A TOOL - “If you want to be chemical-free, you’re going to have to put in a little elbow grease,” Murray says. “Weeding is great exercise. For long taproots like dandelion, I suggest a weeding fork, and for new beds, an iron rake to turn over and disturb young weed seedlings.”

The right tool can make handweeding the most viable option for the average backyard gardener. It may be impossible to handweed 5 acres, but a lawn and a few flower beds can certainly be managed with hoes, trowels and weeding knives that reach between cracks in stone and brickwork. Even chopping the tops off weeds with a string trimmer or scythe will prevent plants from setting seed and gradually weaken root systems.

BRING ON THE PRODUCTS

- There are a number of effective herbicides approved for organic use. Remember that only food and fiber products can be called “certified organic” under the USDA National Organic Program, but certain weed killers can be approved for use on certified organic crops. USDA publishes a list (called the “National List”) of synthetic ingredients that may be used on organic crops, such as certain soaps that are effective weed killers. The list also includes nonsynthetic or natural ingredients, meaning “a substance that is derived from mineral, plant or animal matter and does not undergo a synthetic process” as defined in the USDA regulations, that cannot be used on organic crops.

Some manufacturers choose to have their products certified through an organization like the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI). Other products may be sold with labels that say that they contain natural or organic ingredients, and the use of those terms are regulated through a patchwork of state laws.

Corn gluten meal is an effective pre-emergent herbicide. It stops the germination process so that weed seeds are dead on arrival. It is effective in a lawn or other areas where annuals don’t grow, but remember that it will stop wildflowers and other self-sowers from returning year after year. It also won’t work on weeds that are already in the garden. Package directions usually suggest applying about 20 pounds to 1,000 square feet.

Herbal oils like cinnamon and clove oil will kill leafy green growth in a manner similar to vinegar, but they may not destroy root systems. Tough weeds with deep root systems may be weakened by repeated applications, but make sure you have realistic expectations before you try a product that primarily targets foliage.

Soaps are more commonly used in organic gardening to kill soft-bodied pests, but some weed killers contain soap-based ingredients, also referred to as fatty acids.