

Notes for the Gardening Club Meeting 4th March 2026

Weeds

Introduction

Weeds are often defined as plants growing in the wrong place.

In general this is true, and plants can be relocated in the garden. Unfortunately, it does not take into account the damage that some weeds can have on crops and ornamental plantings. It also downplays the destruction invasive non-native plants can have on the wider environment, when they escape from the garden.

What makes a plant a weed?

Plants that are extremely successful in a particular environment can rapidly become weeds, think of how successful bracken and gorse are at covering hillsides or how quickly annual weeds will exploit a newly dug flower bed. It could also be argued that some plants sold to gardeners as "ground cover" or "vigorous growers" could end up as hard to remove weeds, see the RHS [garden-thugs-potential-nuisance-plants](#).

In general weeds can be divided into three categories, annual weeds, perennial weeds and woody weeds.

- **Annual weeds** - are plants that complete their growing cycle in one year. They have developed to thrive in disturbed or cultivated bare soil. Often producing large quantities of seed which are capable of lying dormant within the soil for many years, and only germinating when the soil is disturbed giving the seed access to sunlight. This group includes plants with very short life cycles, such as groundsel, bitter cresses and chickweed. They may not produce large quantities of seed at a time, but they will produce multiple generations of weeds in one year.
Other annual weeds produce seeds in the late Summer/ Autumn with young seedlings appearing in late Winter/ early Spring, examples of this type of annual weed are garlic mustard, sticky willie, annual nettle and the invasive species himalayan balsam.
- **Perennial weeds** - are plants which have a life span of more than two years. This group contains some of the hardest weeds to eradicate.
Weeds that develop from bulbs or bulbils that are difficult to dig out, like lesser celandines, wild garlic and spanish bluebell.
Weeds with deep tap root systems that allow them to regenerate from broken roots, such as dandelions and docks.
Weeds that are experts at thriving in dense vegetation, like ground elder, couch grass, bindweed, nettles, creeping thistle, rosebay willow herb, vetch, creeping buttercup and horsetails. These weeds have a rhizomatous root system which allows them to easily regenerate from the smallest sliver of root left in the soil.
- **Woody weeds** - woody perennial weeds like brambles.

Identifying weeds

There are a number of plant identification sites online and books on weed identification. The best sites and books have colour photos showing each weeds' new young growth, its flowers and its seedheads. **Beware** that older gardening books lack information about more recent invasive species.

I have found the Garden Organics section on weed identification to be helpful, though far more photos of the weeds are needed to make it truly useful. The same can be said for the weed section of the RHS web site.

There are also identification apps, PlantNet, PictureThis and Google Search.

Finally the list of non-native invasive species weeds is still growing and this does not look as though it is likely to stop. For example the RHS has recently banned golden oyster mushrooms from its gardens, shows and shops, because of outbreaks of this non-native fungi in the wild in England. These outbreaks are thought to have occurred as a result of poor disposal of mushroom growing kits. (*RHS The Garden March 2026 p15*).

Weed management techniques

Weeds play a vital role in providing food for insects and birds. In the past this simple fact was ignored and chemical herbicides were used by both farmers and gardeners as an easy way to keep weeds under control. Thankfully, this method is rapidly going out of favour, and the RHS now advocates lighter-touch weed management techniques instead. These techniques consist of:-

- **Identify the weed** - is it of value to wildlife, if so can it be tolerated. Is it an annual weed, which should be prevented from shedding its seeds, or is it a perennial weed, which needs to be carefully dug out and disposed of.
- **Targeting weeds** - especially perennial weeds before they have a chance to become established.
- **Hand weeding**
- **Deadheading** - seed heads such as dandelions, once they have flowered, to prevent seeds spreading in the wind. Be aware weed seeds provide food for birds.
- **Hoeing** - the best time to hoe is on a dry day leaving the severed weeds to rot down on the soil surface, see <https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/expert-advice/garden-management/weeds/hoeing-the-veg-patch>
- **Strimming** - weeds such as wild garlic and Spanish bluebells once they have flowered, but before their seeds develop, to remove flower heads and all leaves in order to reduce their vigour and prevent seeding.
- **No dig** - recommended by Garden Organic for vegetable plots.
- **Stale seedbed** - Clear the ground and then leave it fallow to allow weed seeds to germinate and perennial weeds to regenerate. The young weed seedlings are then destroyed by shallow hoeing, trying not to disturb the soil. While any remaining perennial weeds can be targeted again. The bed should then be ready to be mulched with compost and sown, or planted up.

- **Mulches** - In the form of a couple of inches of compost, or a green manure sown on bare soil to provide Winter cover, or as a living manure between plants, all deter weed growth.
- **Overseeding lawns** - with grass seed to cover any bald patches and reduce lawn weeds.
- **Dispose of garden waste carefully** – don't add the seedheads, rhizomes, tough roots or bulbs of thuggish plants and weeds to your **home compost**, as it may not reach high enough temperatures to kill them. Instead, take them to the local council recycling centre.

Laws with regards to weeds and invasive plants

- **The Weeds Act 1959**

Although this act is no longer being used by local councils, it is still on the statute book throughout the UK. It applies to the following weeds:-

- Spear Thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*)
- Creeping or Field Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*)
- Curled Dock (*Rumex crispus*)
- Broad-Leaved Dock (*Rumex obtusifolius*)
- Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*)

It mainly applied to wasteland and farmland, where the owners were legally obliged to control these weeds. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/7-8/54>

Note: It must not be forgotten though that Ragwort is poisonous, particularly to horses and cattle. Check the Scottish government web site for guidance on safe ways to remove and dispose of Ragwort (*How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort see link in reference section*). **Ragwort flower seeds will be viable even after the plant has been killed.**

- **Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2012.)**

This legislation makes it illegal to plant or allow any non-native plant species to escape from gardens into the wild.

It was brought into force as a number of non-native plant species can spread very quickly and outcompete native vegetation. These plants can also be extremely destructive, causing damage to riverbanks (Himalayan balsam), and to buildings (Japanese knotweed). They can also be harmful to human and animal health (Giant Hogweed). **Note that all parts of Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed and Himalayan balsam are regarded as controlled waste**, see the RHS web site for advice on how to dispose of these plants within the law

(<https://www.rhs.org.uk/prevention-protection/invasive-non-native-plants>)

In Scotland, the four main invasive plants species are:-

- **Rhododendron** (*Rhododendron ponticum*)
- **Japanese knotweed** (*Fallopia japonica*)
- **Giant hogweed** (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*)
- **Himalayan balsam** (*Impatiens glandulifera*)

With two other species having the potential to be extremely invasive in certain damp habitats:-

- **American skunk cabbage** (*Lysichiton americanus*)
- **Giant rhubarb** (*Gunnera tinctoria*)

Also named in the Act are a considerable number of non-native garden plants that can become invasive weeds if allowed to escape into the wild. There is a comprehensive list of these plants on the RHS web site at [Invasive non-native plants | RHS Advice](#)

This long list includes :-

- **Virginia creeper** (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*)
- **Montbretia** (*Crocosmia × crocosmiiflora*)
- **Japanese honeysuckle** (*Lonicera japonica*)
- **Spanish bluebell** (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*)
- **Cotoneaster** a number of commonly grown varieties
- **Acaena**
- **Few-flowered leek** (*Allium paradoxum*)
- **Three-cornered garlic** (*Allium triquetrum*)

I have a horrible feeling that the allium sample I brought into the club may be one of these two, but I can not be sure what it is until it flowers. I sincerely hope it is garlic chives as identified by PlantNet.

References

RHS What's That Weed: Know Your Weeds and Learn to Live With Them

By Guy Barter

Published in 2024 by Dorling Kindersley Ltd/ Penguin Random House, London

Flora Britannica

By Richard Mabey

Published in 1996 by Chatto and Windus/ Random House, London

Weeds: The Story of Outlaw Plants

By Richard Mabey

Published in 2012 by Profile Books, London.

The Photographic Guide to Identify Garden and Field Weeds

By Roger Phillips

Published in 1986 by Elm Tree Books/ Hamish Hamilton Ltd, London.

<https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/expert-advice/garden-management/weeds>

<https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/expert-advice/garden-management/weeds/weed-datasheets>

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<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2009/12/scottish-government-guidance-prevent-spread-ragwort/documents/0090932-pdf/0090932-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/0090932.pdf>

NOTE

Please can you get back to me if you wish to add anything to these notes.