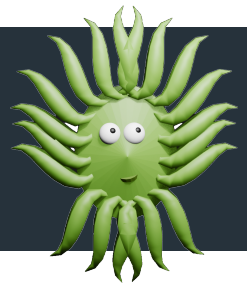
# Waging War on Weeds

Know the enemy, pick the weapon, win the season.

*Weeds are not beatable. They are manageable.*



## Know your enemy

*Same symptom, different biology, different treatment.*

### Annual: the seed factory

**One season.** Sprouts, flowers, sets seed, dies. No lasting root; the seed is the whole strategy.

**Usual suspects:** lamb's quarter, chickweed, purslane, crabgrass, pigweed, groundsel, annual bluegrass.

**Seed math:** one lamb's quarter makes up to 75,000 seeds. Pigweed, 100,000 or more.

**The kill:** hoe or pull **before it flowers**. Timing is the whole battle.

### Perennial: the survivor

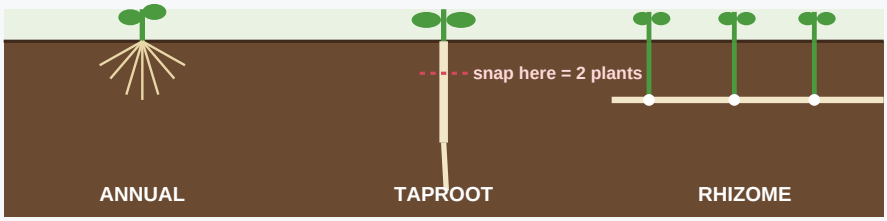
**Dies back, returns from the root** every spring, in the same spot.

**Usual suspects:** dandelion, dock, thistle, plantain, ground elder, bindweed, quackgrass, creeping Charlie.

**Pulling backfires:** a broken taproot makes two plants; chopped rhizomes make a plant from every piece.

**The kill:** take the **whole root**, or cut back again and again until the reserves run out. Mulch heavily. Herbicide is for the stubborn ones.

### Pull one up and look at the root




*Thin, shallow. Pulls out clean.* *Thick and deep. Breaks off.* *Sideways. Every node is a new plant.*

**Three quick tests**
**The root.** Thin and shallow is an annual. Thick, deep, or sideways is a perennial.
**The spot.** Back from the same spot? Perennial root. Back from new seed? Annual.
**The calendar.** Up early, before you touch the soil? Overwintered perennial.

## Why they keep coming back

*Four reasons, four fixes.*

### 1 Root left

Dandelion taproots run 12 inches or more. Pull the top 2 and the rest regrows.

**Fix:** a taproot digger that gets the full depth.

### 2 Seeded first

Seeds from the parent drop right where it stood.

**Fix:** remove before flowering. After seeding, it's a partial win at best.

### 3 Cozy spot

Wet low spots and compacted path edges (plantain loves them) favor certain weeds.

**Fix:** change the conditions: aerate, amend, drain.

### 4 Seed rain

A neighbor's dandelion or an alley thistle sends seed your way.

**Fix:** mulch, and don't let your own weeds seed.

## Three rules of engagement

*Every weed strategy comes back to these.*

### 1 Don't feed it

Every weed that seeds adds hundreds or thousands of seeds to your soil's bank. Remove weeds before they flower.

### 2 Don't stir the soil

Tilling and pulling bring dormant seeds up into the light. Hoe at the surface instead, and mulch bare ground right away.

### 3 Cover the ground

Bare soil is an invitation. Mulch, dense planting, and ground covers leave no vacancy.

**How to weed without backfiring:** hoe rather than pull • use a root-extracting tool on perennials • weed when the soil is moist, so roots release whole • mulch immediately • hoe every week or two while weeds are seedlings: **twenty minutes now, or two hours later.**

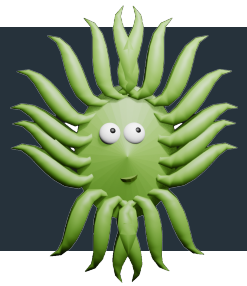


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# Choose Your Weapon

The right tool, the right cover, the right moment.

*Buy the stirrup hoe first.*



## The short list of tools

*Five tools cover nearly every weed.*

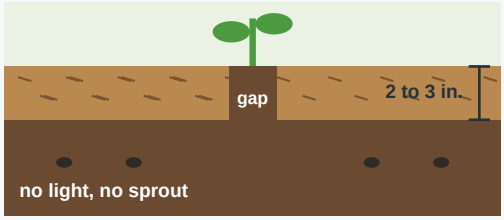
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|---|---|---|
| **Stirrup hoe** | Cuts on the push and the pull, just under the surface, with little soil disturbance. | Weekly passes through beds. Annuals at seedling stage. **Buy this first.** |
| **Dandelion digger** | A long, narrow forked tip that goes down beside the root and levers it out whole. | Dandelions, thistle, dock, and any taproot. Lawn edges, borders, paths. |
| **CobraHead weeder** | A curved steel claw that hooks roots out with a pulling motion. | Tight spots between plants and bed edges. The long handle means no kneeling. |
| **Cape Cod weeder** | A small angled blade that slips under roots and levers them out. | Containers, raised beds, and small areas big tools can't reach. |
| **Flame weeder** | A propane torch. It only has to heat the cells enough to rupture them. | Paths, gravel, and cracks; flame, wait a week, flame again. **Not** for close plantings or dry, fire-risk conditions. |

## Mulch: the weed's worst enemy

*It blocks the light seeds need to sprout.*

**2 to 3 inches** is the working depth. Under 2, light gets through. Over 3 in vegetable beds, roots can struggle. Replenish once a season. It stops seeds already in the soil, not weeds already growing or seed that lands on top.

**Use: straw** in vegetable beds, **wood chips** on paths and ornamental beds, **shredded leaves**, **compost**, and **cardboard** as a kill mulch (layer, wet, cover). **Never: hay** (full of seeds), **rubber mulch**, or mulch piled against stems.




*Keep it a few inches off the stem.*

## Weed killer: when it earns its place

*Read the label. Systemic reaches the root; contact doesn't.*

**Makes sense**
- Persistent perennials (bindweed, knotweed): a systemic herbicide travels to the root.
- Paths, driveways, and hardscape.
- Clearing a new bed, applied well before planting.
- Infestations too big for hands.

**Wrong tool**
- Active vegetable gardens: drift and soil residue.
- Near ponds, streams, or drainage to water.
- Anywhere a hoe or digger would do the job.

**No-chemical options:** horticultural vinegar on young weeds, boiling water in cracks, flame.

## Cover the ground

*Ground covers take 1 to 2 seasons to knit. Mulch and hand weed until then.*

**Shade under trees**
Pachysandra, sweet woodruff, wild ginger, liriope.

**Sunny slopes**
Creeping juniper, cotoneaster, sedum.

**Between stones**
Creeping thyme, creeping phlox, brass buttons, Irish moss.

**Bed edges**
Lamb's ear, ajuga, creeping Jenny, hostas in shade.

**Caution:** mint, English ivy, and vinca can outcompete everything, not just weeds. If a plant is labeled invasive in your region, skip it.

**Or eat the enemy.** Dandelion, lamb's quarter, purslane, chickweed, and wood sorrel are all edible, but only if you've identified them with complete certainty. Never harvest from roadsides, railroad tracks, or treated ground. When in doubt, compost it.

**Tom Brownthumb's dandelion returned fourteen times.** He counted. On try fifteen he used a taproot weeder. It has not returned.


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