From the Potting Shed…

How does the saying go? It’s a woman’s prerogative to change her mind. Mother Nature has done that this spring. Last May was unusually warm and this May was cool and wet. I don’t know what she has in mind for June, but I do know what most of us will be doing, weeding. All that rain has made it hard for us gardeners to work in our gardens, but it hasn’t made it hard for the weeds to appear. One sunny day and they explode out of nowhere. So once you do have your gardens cleaned out and planted, the race to stay ahead of the weeds begins. Some find weeding a tedious chore and others find it therapeutic. Either way, we hope you find the article on the basics of weeding and mulching helpful.

Get gardening and get growing,

The Sherburne County Master Gardeners

Weeding & Mulching 101

The ugly truth is weeds are never going away. But you can learn to live with them by keeping them at a manageable level. Opportunists that they are, weeds will grow wherever they find conditions favorable either in your lawn, your gardens, or the crack in the sidewalk. This time I’ll focus on weeds in the garden and I’ll tackle weeds in the lawn a bit later this fall. When I say gardens I mean vegetable gardens, flower beds, perennial gardens, mixed borders, foundation plantings, the much-debated tree rings or anything else not primarily turf grass. These are places where you generally don’t want to use a chemical herbicide because most herbicides can damage or kill the desirable plants. And of course, for safety’s sake it’s not something you want to use in a vegetable garden.

THE PURPOSE OF WEEDS

Let’s take a step back and look at the big picture. Weeds are just like any other plant; their sole purpose in life is to reproduce. They want to flower and produce seed, lots of seeds. These seeds are dispersed in lots of ways, wind, bird droppings, scat, burs that stick to passers-by and other creative ways. Some also spread by stolons (runners) or rhizomes which are specialized roots that grow horizontally above or below ground and here and there put down roots and send up a shoot.
THE PURPOSE OF GARDENERS

Once the inevitable weeds germinate, your job is to remove them. Your strategy with any weed is to remove it before it flowers and goes to seed because all those seeds represent future weeds you will have to remove. That removal usually means hand pulling or using any assortment of tools to take out the offenders. The more typical tools can be short handled hand tools or long handled tools for use when standing or attacking a large number of weeds. The idea is to cut the weed off just below the soil surface, severing the roots from the stems and leaves, or by digging up the plant altogether. A traditional hoe works well but there are any number of other styles from triangular shaped to loop shaped. Use whichever works best for you. You may also find you need a few different types to tackle different kinds of weeds or for use in different types of gardens. What works in your vegetable garden may not work in the foundation plantings. The key to using any tool is to keep the cutting edge sharp. The younger and smaller the weeds are when you cut them down or pull them, the better. Some weeds have long taproots or rhizomes and sometimes you may need to repeatedly pull the weed throughout the summer until it finally exhausts the reserves stored in its roots and gives up.

KEEPING THEM IN THE DARK

A better strategy is to minimize the number of weeds that germinate in the first place. Mulching keeps the weed seeds that are already in the soil from being exposed to the sun and germinating. Mulching also has other benefits which is why it is such a good strategy for gardens. It helps hold in moisture, provides some protection from erosion, offers protection from soil born diseases, keeps the soil cool in the hottest part of the summer and the best part, any weeds that do grow are easier to pull. There are two kinds of mulch, organic and inorganic.

What type of mulch you use depends on the type of garden and your needs, your budget and how much time you have to maintain the mulch.

REUSING THE PLANTS

Organic or plant-based mulches decompose over time and will therefore need to be replaced. As these mulches decompose they can tie up nitrogen in the soil but if you are fertilizing regularly this shouldn’t be a problem. But once decomposed, they put organic matter and nutrients back into the soil for your plants to use. Grass clippings, leaves and newspaper are usually little or no cost since you are reusing what you already have. Straw, shredded wood or green mulches have costs which can add up if you are using a lot of it. Shredded wood and green mulches last longer however which makes them more cost effective. Here are some common types of organic mulches and some considerations when using them.

- Straw – make sure its “clean” with no weed seeds or you could make your problem worse
- Grass clippings – don’t use clippings from a lawn treated with herbicide since the residual herbicide can harm or kill your desirable plants
- Newspaper – use several layers underneath other organic mulches
- Leaves – shredding makes them layer and knit together better and keeps them from sticking together in heavy dense mats
- Shredded wood or bark – the more finely shredded, the more tightly they mesh together, the harder it is for weeds to grow through
- Green mulches – short groundcovers that fill in around plants

PUTTING IT DOWN

Clear the garden of weeds before putting down any mulch otherwise the existing weeds will simply push up through it. Straw, grass clippings and leaves decompose within a growing season and are great in a vegetable garden. For more long-term plantings such
as perennial gardens or foundation plantings, shredded bark or shredded wood works well. And it’s readily available this time of year on just about every corner or at any home store. I will leave color choice up to you but here are a few thoughts. One neighbor loves the color choices and experiments every year. Another neighbor uses dark brown because it looks like dirt and she thinks it makes her look like an extremely meticulous gardener. I use shredded cedar because all of my oak leaves and acorns blend in letting me be a less than meticulous gardener. Apply organic mulches once the soil has warmed up for the season. Spread an even layer that is 2” to 4” deep around each plant. Do not mound it up around plants. If you are using straw, grass clippings or shredded leaves which decompose fairly quickly, reapply as needed throughout the growing season to maintain an adequate layer. In vegetable gardens, mulching between the rows and your walkways keeps the weeds throughout the garden to a minimum. In more permanent plantings keeping the plants closer together also shades out the weeds and their seeds and you have less area to mulch.

MAN-MADE

Inorganic mulches include sheets of plastic or landscape fabric and are generally used in vegetable gardens. These can be used early in the season to help warm up the ground. They are laid on the ground and holes are cut to allow planting. These are best used for plants that are set out as transplants rather than direct seeded. Watering is done through the planting hole, although some water does pass through landscape fabric. Exposure to sun can breakdown some of these products. At the end of the season these are picked up and discarded, although if it is in good shape it can be rolled or folded up and reused the following season. These can be more expensive than the organic mulches.

MAKE IT EASY

Here are a few other tips to make weeding less of a chore. Weed regularly and often. Set aside an amount of time each day or week to weed and stick to it to keep things from getting out of control. Keep tools handy. Consider putting tools in weather resistant storage out in the garden especially if the gardens are further away from your house, garage or shed. I’ve seen old mailboxes, oversized birdhouses, plastic storage boxes, or 5 gallon pails with covers. Make a place to put them. If you are like me and just need to pull that one weed while strolling around the yard, strategically place plastic buckets throughout the garden to collect the weeds in between regular weeding sessions.

Armed with knowledge and strategies you can make weeds take a back seat to the vegetables, flowers, trees and shrubs that you really want to grow, flourish and enjoy.

Thank You!

We really appreciate all of you who came out on a dreary, wet day to buy plants at our annual Plant Sale and who took advantage of the Malmborg’s Greenhouse Fundraiser. Proceeds from both our Plant Sale and the Malmborg’s Fundraiser are used for our ongoing educational efforts.

Thank you for supporting your Sherburne County Master Gardeners!
Weed of the Month

**ONE GARDENER’S WEED IS ANOTHER GARDENER’S WILDFLOWER**

Little-leaf Buttercup, also known as Kidney-leaf Buttercup and Early Wood Buttercup

*Ranunculus arbovitus*

Part of the Rununculaceae or Buttercup family, it’s related to anemones, marsh marigolds, crowfoots and meadow rues.

At first glance you might think this is a type of mustard, but you’d be wrong. This North American native grows in part shade in moist fertile soils. It’s a biennial or short lived perennial with a fibrous root system. As a biennial it grows just round or kidney shaped basal leaves the first year and blooms the second. The flower stalk which can be 6 - 24 inches has few leaves while the leaves clustered at the top of the flower stalk are long and narrow. The flowers are small, yellow blooms that you might just miss. The blooms appear April thru June and then they set seed and the next generation forms its basal cluster. While some birds and small animals can eat the seeds, the plants are generally toxic to humans, pets and livestock. Contact with the sap can cause skin irritation and if eaten cause mouth blisters and gastric issues. Some people may leave it since it is a wildflower, others may remove it because of its toxicity. If it is in your lawn, repeated mowing will kill it off since it is short lived and will not be able to produce seed to spread. If it is in your flower or vegetable garden beds, remove by hand pulling or hoeing before it goes to seed. If you hand pull this plant, be sure to wear gloves to avoid contact with the sap.

Oak Wilt Reminder

We are in the high-risk period for the spread of oak wilt. Do NOT prune any oak trees until we reach a safe period (usually in the winter). If an oak is accidently injured with a lawn mower or trimmer, seal the wound with shellac or water based latex paint within 15 minutes. If you have storm damage to an oak, prune off any damaged branches once it is safe to do so and then immediately seal the cut as described above. For more information about oak wilt, click [HERE](#)
What’s Coming Up with the SCMG

**JUNIOR MASTER GARDENER**

Designed for youth First grade and up (ages 6 - 12) to learn all about gardening with hands on experience and projects from the Junior Master Gardener Program curriculum.

**LIBRARY SERIES**

Jointly Sponsored by the Great River Regional Library - Elk River and the SCMG

- Thursdays June 13th – August 15th except July 4th; 1:00 - 2:00 pm
- Classes held at the Great River Regional Library - Elk River Branch
- No fee, pre-registration required.

Register with the library at [https://griver.org/events](https://griver.org/events) and select the Elk River Branch to see the calendar and links to the registration form.

**FAIRGROUND SERIES**

Sponsored by the SCMG

- Thursdays June 6th – August 8th except July 4th and July 18th; 6:30 - 8:00 pm
- Classes held at the Sherburne County Fairgrounds
- $10 fee to cover supplies, pre-registration required

Register on the SCMG website [https://sherburnecountymastergardeners.org](https://sherburnecountymastergardeners.org). Look for the Junior Master Gardener program under the Events tab.

**ELK RIVER FARMER’S MARKET**

- Thursdays June 6th thru October 3rd, 3 - 7 pm
- Located downtown Elk River at Park Plaza on Main Street
- Stop by and visit us at the City of Elk River Table

**GARDENING CLASS WITH A MASTER GARDENER**

Jointly Sponsored by the Great River Regional Library - Elk River and the SCMG

- Friday June 14th, Friday July 19th and Friday August 16th, 1 - 2 pm
- Classes held at the Great River Regional Library - Elk River Branch
- Free but pre-registration encouraged

Register with the library at [https://griver.org/events](https://griver.org/events) and select the Elk River Branch to see the calendar and links.

**Q AND A WITH THE MASTER GARDENERS**

- Second Tuesday of every month, May thru September 1 - 2 pm
- Garden talks held at the Elk River Activity Center 55yrs+
- Bring your questions and even your plants
- Free but registration is preferred by calling 763.635.4500
**BIG LAKE GARDENING 101 SERIES**

Learn the basics of gardening with hands on learning

- Sponsored by the City of Big Lake, Big Lake Community Education and the SCMG
- Tuesday June 4th, July 9th, August 6th, September 17th, 6 – 7 pm
- Classes held at the Big Lake Community Gardens
Registration and more information at [https://biglake.ce.elecyo.com](https://biglake.ce.elecyo.com)

**BIG LAKE FARMER’S MARKET**

- The market is held Wednesdays June 5 thru Aug 28, 3 – 7 pm; Wednesdays in September 3 – 6 pm
- We are there every 3rd Wednesday of the month
- Located at Lakeside Park
- Stop by and enjoy a gardening activity for kid

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Autumn Gardening: Season of Change

**Saturday, September 21, 2019**  
8:00 am – 3:00 pm  
Oliver Kelley Farm  
15788 Kelley Farm Rd NW, Elk River, MN 55330

Join us for educational sessions, local Master Gardener information and a silent auction!

More information will be posted on our website!  
[www.sherburnecountymastergardeners.org](http://www.sherburnecountymastergardeners.org)

Online registration will open later this Summer!

Questions? Contact the Sherburne County Extension Office (763) 765-3075 or mncst-sherburne@umn.edu

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Sherburne County Master Gardeners

Cookbook numbers are limited, get yours while supplies last!