

HOW TO WEED

It may seem like a simple matter. We have all taken out weeds and it seems simple and straightforward. However, there are ways of doing it which make the task easier. The aim of this article is to describe a number of situations and solutions, with particular reference to no-dig gardening and the need to avoid disturbing the soil.

The simplest way of weeding is to hoe. If you can hoe your garden or allotment once a week when the weeds are tiny, or maybe once a fortnight, that is the ideal and you should look no further. However, since it is very difficult to hoe if the soil is muddy, that may cause you to delay hoeing until the plot dries out, and in the meantime the weeds will grow..... Also, if you are away for some time the situation may have got out of hand and simple hoeing may have ceased to be possible. Then comes the moment when my Five Pass solution may be appropriate.

When the weeds are up to one foot high you have a problem. Some may be in flower, even dropping seeds – such as the dreaded groundsel. The First Pass therefore consists of going round the plot row by row with a trowel and bucket to take out the groundsel plants by the roots. Try to avoid scattering any seeds. Groundsel plants, even if dug up and left on the soil, will flower and produce seeds quite quickly. The only solution is to dig them up, put them in the compost heap then bury them with other weeds. On the First Pass you should also dig up any other weeds which are flowering and about to produce seeds, such as summer thistles, heartsease, plantains and grasses. On the Second Pass deep-rooted weeds such as dandelions and docks are removed with the corner of a spade and taken off to the compost heap. One has to remove at least the top 3 inches of the root to prevent re-growth but by using just the corner of the spade it is possible to remove the weed without too much damage to the soil structure.

The Third Pass is the most productive. One needs to disturb the soil as little as possible. So, using a spade horizontally with two hands, scrape the soil between rows of vegetables to a depth of about a quarter of an inch, propelling the spade forward for about a foot each time. Then, using one hand, take up a handful of weeds, bang the weeds on the flat part of the spade held in the other hand to loosen-off any soil, then put the handful in the bucket. It is surprising how quickly one can move down a row like that. With the spade one can scrape right up to the roots of the vegetables. The Fourth Pass consists of going down the rows of vegetables with a trowel to take out any remaining weeds which are very close to the vegetables or are inside the rows of vegetables.

The final Fifth Pass consists of hoeing between the rows of vegetables to tidy up - and to destroy any tiny weeds which have survived the earlier passes. The plot can now be left for a week or two before hoeing again to destroy weeds which have germinated in the meantime.

All the foregoing assumes that perennial weeds will have been removed prior to sowing the crops. The above method will not work if perennial weeds such as couch grass, ground elder and bindweed are present. Since it is impossible to dig up **all** the roots of such weeds (and to attempt to do so would destroy the soil structure) another method is called-for. Lay out a short length of the weed on the surface of bare soil then, using a fine paint brush, paint several leaves with concentrated glyphosate. Do this on a dry day when rain is not expected for at least 6 hours. Then leave the weeds for about 3 weeks. During that time the glyphosate will work its way down through the latticework of roots and destroy the plant completely. I know it is not entirely organic but if only the leaves are painted the amount of weedkiller used will be tiny – and glyphosate is supposed to be neutralised when contacting the soil. However, if the patch of soil is completely infested with perennial weeds one can cover the whole plot with heavy-grade black polythene sheet (from builders' merchants) for 9 months or so – see below. That should kill all perennial weeds and is a completely organic solution.

When weeds are over a foot high and I have a desperate situation I use my chopper, which is a blade about 3 inches wide attached to a short handle (about 3 feet long). I proceed along the row, chopping about 3 inches at a time, dragging the upended weeds towards my feet with each chop. I penetrate the soil by only half an inch at the most with each chop. Then, using the back of the chopper which consists of two tines about 5 inches long, I rake up the weeds and put them in a bucket, trying to shake off loose soil first. That method, using the chopper, is a way of mass-producing weeds for the compost heap and, again, it is surprising how fast one can clear a row of weeds. I obtained my chopper from a garden centre in France over 30 years ago. They are still on sale there but I have not seen them on sale in the UK.

Now, going to the extremes, if you are taking over a plot which is completely infested with perennial weeds 3 to 6 feet high as I once did, you will first need to scythe them down, let them dry out, put them into stacks and set fire to them when the wind is blowing in a favourable direction (or it is bonfire night). Then cover the entire plot with black plastic sheet held down by bricks or by burying the edges of the sheet with about 6 inches of soil. Nine months or so later, pull back the plastic sheet, rake off loose dead weeds, rake level the soil and sow your crops. There will be no need to dig and you will have a plot which is entirely organic with the precious soil mycorrhizal fungi preserved and raring to go in their function of helping your crops to grow.

If you can keep on top of weeds by such methods, and at all costs prevent them from flowering and dropping their seeds in thousands, the weeding burden will become lighter and lighter with the passing seasons. However, you will never eradicate weeds completely since there will always be weed seeds in the soil which will choose to germinate many years later. Also, weed seeds will be blown in from neighbouring gardens and allotment plots – and be dropped by birds.

Finally, one of the best ways of getting on top of the weed problem is to grow crops. The presence of your crops will inhibit weed seed germination, whether by shielding the weed seeds from sunlight or by some other mechanism. It seems to work.

Good gardening!

MIKE MASON