

Weeds getting you down?

In weather like this weeds almost seem to spring up overnight. But weeds can be beaten – or at least controlled – if you know what kind of weeds you’re dealing with and what conditions they prefer. Change the growing conditions, and you will go a long way to preventing future weeds without backache or herbicides. So the first step to winning the war on weeds is to find out what weeds you have. Many are wildflowers, so can be identified from wildflower books or websites.

Once you know what you have for weeds, you need to know what conditions they prefer in order to know what may be wrong. Moss is one of the more common “problems” we hear about with lawns. Actually this is not necessarily a problem, as moss gardening has become quite popular. So if you have a healthy crop of moss, perhaps you should consider taking advantage of what are obviously ideal conditions and start a moss garden!

The presence of moss may indicate that you’re mowing too low. It may also mean low pH (acidity), excess soil moisture, or too much shade. Chickweed may also indicate too low mowing, and mouse-ear chickweed may indicate substantial shade. Annual bluegrass may indicate too low mowing, but may also appear in compacted soils, or those with excess moisture. Creeping speedwell may indicate too low mowing, excess shade, or drought conditions. If you think low mowing may be the problem, simply raise the height of mower blades. Most lawns should be mowed around two inches high, and with no more than one-third of the grass blade cut off at any one time.

Prostrate spurge may also indicate compaction or drought. If you think soils are compacted, you can rent or buy an aerator for you lawn to help break up the surface and allow water and air to enter – hence the name. At Lee Valley Tools you can even buy shoe attachments with spikes to wear while mowing, aerating the soil as you walk. Maybe it’s time to give up the lawn tractor, your lawn will be less compacted and you’ll benefit from the exercise!

Clover species may indicate low nitrogen. Rabbit's foot clover may indicate drought or low pH. Hop clover, on the other hand, indicates possible high pH. We actually like some clover in our lawns, as in drought it remains green. It is also a legume – a type of plant whose roots take nitrogen from the air and turn it into forms plants can use. Having clover in your lawn means you won't need to add as much nitrogen fertilizer.

Birdsfoot trefoil and vetch, similar to the clovers, also indicate low nitrogen. Docks, mullein, hawkweed, sheep sorrel, and wild strawberry may indicate low pH. Mullein may indicate low fertility in general, as can wild carrot, wild parsnip, wild radish, foxtail grass, or mallow.

In addition to creeping speedwell and spurge, dry soils may be indicated by the presence of crabgrass, pigweed, yarrow, yellow woodsorrel, and curly dock. Mulching can help to control weeds and keep moisture in the soil. So before you rush out to spend money on herbicides or a lawn care service, look at your weeds more closely. Let them be your guide on what corrective measures to take before you start spraying chemicals on your garden. You may only need to aerate a compacted soil, add some lime to increase the soil pH, cut a few tree limbs to allow more light, or improve watering practices and add organic matter and mulch for dry soils.