

## YEAR ROUND GARDENING

### **What Your Weeds Are Telling You**

Eileen Tully, Colorado Master Gardener

I confess to being a compulsive weed puller. Not just in my own garden. Often, when visiting friends or chatting with neighbors, I am compelled to reach down and yank out the offending stealer of moisture, nutrients and light from plants, that in my opinion, don't deserve to grow.

Now I'm learning some weeds, called indicator weeds, can tell us a lot about our soil and gardening practices.

Geochemical botanists read the kind of plants growing in an area and are then able to determine what minerals are in the soil. Horticultural educator, Kelly Allsup of Illinois State University, states "If you have the following weeds, your soil



may be letting you know about a gardening issue." Note: if you don't know the name of your weeds check online images to find a match or email a photo to extension at CSUMG2@elpasoco.com.

*Photo courtesy of Eileen Tully*

-- Chicory and bindweed are indicators the soil is too compacted. Aeration and a soil conditioner like compost or cover crop can help reduce the populations of these offenders.

-- Foxtails, dock and horsetail thrive in wet conditions. Try growing goldenrods, joe-pye weed and other moisture-loving perennials and grasses.

-- Dandelion and stinging nettle is an indication of acidic soil. Most plants prefer a slightly acidic soil so a soil test may be necessary to determine if the soil is too acidic for plant growth.

-- Thistle is an indication your soil needs more acid. This can be achieved with soil amendments like ferrous sulfate or aluminum sulfate. A soil test will indicate how much will be needed to apply.

-- Wild carrot, wild radish and wild parsnip grow in infertile soils. A fertility treatment, cover crop or additions of compost to condition the soil may be needed.

-- Pigweed indicates an abundance of nitrogen.

-- Red clover indicates an excess of potassium.

-- Purslane and mustard are an indication of an abundance of phosphorous.

-- Crab grass is an indication of poor fertility.

Observing what weeds you have, and the conditions they prefer growing in, can indicate how to discourage them. However, the science of reading weeds could not only reduce the population of the most detested pests but with the proper soil amendments make everything else grow better. Begin by having your soil tested to find out exactly what needs to be added to any crop (vegetables, trees and grasses). Cover crops are an excellent way to deter weeds, add organic matter and can improve the health of next year's gardens.

Another thought gaining popularity in the horticulture world is to be more accepting of weeds because they are a habitat for wildlife and a food source for insects.

Wild Queen Anne's lace is a great larval food for swallowtail butterflies, and dandelions are an excellent source of nectar and pollen for honeybees.

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research based answers. Get answers to your horticulture questions by [ask.extension.org](http://ask.extension.org). any time day or night. Monday to Thursday from 9 a.m. – 12 p.m. you can phone 520-7684 or emailing [CSUmq2@elpasoco.com](mailto:CSUmq2@elpasoco.com).

For current garden tips visit [www.facebook.com/ColoradoMasterGardeners.EPC](http://www.facebook.com/ColoradoMasterGardeners.EPC)

For current classes visit: [elpaso.extension.colostate.edu](http://elpaso.extension.colostate.edu).

### **Weed ID Web Sites**

North Carolina State University (an actual key) <http://www.turffiles.ncsu.edu/turfid/>

Michigan State University (an actual key) <http://www.msuturfweeds.net/>

Color Atlas of Turf Weeds. 2008. John Wiley and Sons. An excellent guide to ID of common broadleaf and grassy weeds.

Weeds of the West. 1991. The University of Wyoming. 630 pages. I.D. of many Western weeds, both grassy and broadleaf.