

The Weekly Plant

23 January 2015

A Horticultural Diversion #2

Keeping Unwanted Plants Out of Your Yard

Plant seeds are everywhere. Some seeds may grow into plants you love. Lupine and desert marigold are often among this group. Other seeds become Sahara mustard, buffel grass, or desert broom, plants you won't love. What to do?

Any time I'm faced with a pest problem, I ask three questions:

1. How do I keep the pest from arriving or multiplying in my yard?
2. What can I do to make my yard or my plant more resistant to the pest?
3. How can I change the environment in my yard to reduce the pest?

Gardeners in less arid parts of the country have more flexibility when working with questions 2 and 3. Covering bare soil with desirable plants that shade the soil helps make the yard more resistant to unwanted plants. Here, allowing wildflowers to grow is a good start, but they may not be able to fight off the most aggressive invasive plants (invasives' ability to outcompete our natives is why they are called "invasive"). Covering the soil with landscape plants would use excessive amounts of irrigation water (and often they can't fight off the invasives, either).

Gardens in the East are often irrigated with sprinklers, watering the unwanted as well as the desirable plants. Switching to a drip system that only irrigates garden plants changes the environment in the yard and would help control unwanted plants in the East. In the West we already use drip systems.

Bark mulch helps reduce weeds in the East. Here we use stone mulch. That may keep seedlings that germinate under the mulch from growing. However, seeds that fall into the mulch may grow much as they do in our naturally stony, sandy soil.

So, we must concentrate on keeping unwanted plant seeds out of our yard and, once the plants are growing in our yard, keep them from multiplying.

No one purposefully brings unwanted seeds or plants into their yard, but it is easy to do unintentionally. For example, the stone mulch we put in our yard a couple of years ago brought us a snapdragon and Apache plume but also tumbleweed, Sahara mustard, cleome, and an unattractive buckwheat. Seeds, and even plants, can come in soil, birdseed, potted plants, even on the tools you used when you helped your neighbor.

So, before purchasing a plant at a nursery, look around. If there are lots of extra plants growing in the pots, you're more likely to bring something unexpected into your yard. Clean your tools before and after moving them from one yard to another. Any time you make modifications to your landscape (like adding stone mulch), check it regularly and remove any unwanted plants you accidentally added to your yard.

Even with all this work, unwanted plants will still appear in your yard. Once they are there, your first goal is to keep them from multiplying, that is, keep them from flowering and producing seed. Here's what to do:

- Walk your yard regularly and dig unwanted plants out of the ground while they are still small. They are easiest to remove at this stage.
- If the unwanted plants are large, dig them up and put in the trash. Flowers are often small and sporadic. If there is any possibility that the plants have flowers (and thus may have seeds), DO NOT just leave the plants on the ground. The seeds may drop to the ground and germinate next year. Throw the plants - and any possible seeds - into the trash.
- Cut off the flower stalks as they start to form. This can be very labor intensive since the plant will often respond by sending up another flower stalk, and then another. However, it can be a short-term fix until you remove the plant.
- Kill the plant with chemicals. Herbicides are, for me, a last resort. It is too easy to kill the plants I want along with those I don't want. I reserve these chemicals for hard-to-kill plants like desert broom. If you do use herbicides, use the least toxic, shortest acting chemical that will do the job. Make sure you have identified the plant(s) you are treating and then make sure the chemical works on that plant. Read all of the product label (yes, even the boring parts) and follow the instructions, especially for use of personal protective equipment and disposal of any unused herbicide.

Using these techniques Villagers have eliminated Russian thistle (tumbleweed) from the Village and are having success in getting rid of Sahara mustard. The trick is to be persistent. Check your yard regularly, so you get ahead of the problem.

Every person differs in the plants they want and don't want in their yard. I love our wildflowers, so I am very selective about the plants I pull out of the ground. I hope Weekly Plant has given you an appreciation of our native plants and you, too, decide to nurture them in your yard.

Text by Mary Welch-Keesey