



Making the most of 'weeds'

Overview of weeds in permaculture

Weeds are essential for maintaining life on Earth (Lydon, S, 2016). In fact, all modern plant life has descended from weeds. Weeds are an important part of modern ecosystems and can be beneficial to gardeners and farmers, their removal deprives soil of precious nutrients. Despite this, weeds are often seen as villains in an ecosystem, especially by those concerned with aesthetics.



Benefits of weeds

- Weeds protect soil from erosion - By binding the soil and creating a barrier to protect it from the elements
- Weeds break up clay soil - The roots penetrate tough soil, creating channels for water and air
- Weeds improve soil quality - Through the collection of nutrients and delivery of those nutrients to the topsoil when they die, allowing other plants to benefit
- Weeds encourage wildlife - By providing food and habitat materials
- Weeds can have beautiful flowers

What makes a weed?

There are many definitions of a “weed”, but most come down to the notion of a plant being where it shouldn't; ‘A wild plant growing where it is not wanted and in competition with cultivated plants.’ (*definition of 'weed' in Oxford Dictionary*). This definition makes ‘weeds’ very subjective, as some people may want the plant and others may not. There is in fact no botanical difference between weeds and other plants.

Traditional uses

Weeds have been used in farming the world over since farming began; hay for example, is a very versatile material made from grasses and weeds, it is a major staple of many livestock farmers for bedding and animal feed, it can also be used for seeding and as a mulching material.

Historically, many weeds have been eaten, including dandelions, clover and chickweed - all of which make a great salad. Weeds have been traditionally used for their medicinal benefits; chickweed for example can be used to relieve soreness from cuts and burns (Markham, 2018).



Burdock (*Arctium*)

Burdock is a tall, flowering plant with coarse leaves, which grows worldwide, the burrs of the flower are known for sticking to hair and items of clothing.

Food use: Burdock root is edible and very popular in Asia, it's immature flower stalks can be harvested in late

spring and taste similar to artichokes.

Medical benefits:

- Good for the skin
- Reduces acne
- Regulates Blood Pressure (source: 7 Amazing Benefits of Burdock, 2017)



Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*)

Stinging nettles are a perennial plant, the defensive hairs of which sting when touched.

Food use: Nettles can be drunk as a tea, eaten in soups, in pesto, or like spinach (the stingers become safe once the nettles have been cooked).

Medical benefits:

- Soothes premenstrual cramps
- Improves circulation
- Treats respiratory problems (Source: 11 Amazing Benefits of Stinging Nettle)



Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinalis*)

Dandelions are another perennial, which blossoms late spring - early autumn, first as a bright yellow flower, then as a white 'clock' composed of many small, cylindrical seeds.

Food use: The petals can be eaten in salads or soups, or used for making dandelion tea. The roots can be used to make a healthy coffee substitute.

Medical benefits:

- Helps liver function
- Helps balance blood sugar levels
- Great source of vitamins

Source: Mama, K. (2018)



While weeds can be described as in the wrong place, this does not stop them being useful, they are usually easier to grow than those plants which are traditionally cultivated, many are perennial, many can be harvested and eaten, many have medicinal uses and many will produce attractive flowers.

Weeds can be used for animal bedding and feed, as well as for mulching, but most weeds have their own individual benefits and applications. Growing plants traditionally considered weeds can be easy and mean less work is expended in their removal. However, a change in attitude and willingness to 'buck the trend' is needed to actively encourage them to grow.

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References

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Further Reading

The Earth Care Manual: A Permaculture Handbook for Britain and Other Temperate Climates: A Permaculture Handbook for Britain and Other Temperate Countries, Patrick Whitefield (ISBN: 9781856230216)

Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered, E. F. Schumacher (ISBN: 9780099225614)

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Permaculture Association Knowledge Base: <https://knowledgebase.permaculture.org.uk>