

Broadleaf Weeds or Pretty Wildflowers?

By Susan Camp

While sorting through some old files, I found a booklet on identifying and controlling broadleaf weeds. The color photographs of various pesky weeds piqued my interest. I recognize some weeds, but I have never researched their growth habits and environmental needs. Most of the time, I ignore them. They are green, and as long as they stay out of the flowerbeds, they can grow anywhere they want. I respect that not everyone feels the same. Those who want a perfect turfgrass lawn go after weeds much like the intrepid carton hunter stalks that “wascally wabbit.”

Common lawn and field weeds are divided into broadleaf and grassy types. Broadleaf weeds are further classified as winter annual weeds, summer annual weeds, and broadleaf perennial weeds. Since we are awaiting the arrival of spring, this column will focus on the identification and control of broadleaf winter annual and perennial weeds.

Broadleaf winter annual weeds are early harbingers of spring. Purple dead nettle (*Lamium purpureum*) is one of the first weeds to pop up as the days grow warmer. Native to Europe, purple dead nettle is classified as a nuisance in some regions. Its square stems declare it a member of the mint family. The heart-shaped leaves overlap, and the plant is crowned with tiny red or purple lipped flowers.

Henbit (*Lamium amplexicaule*), another European native, blooms at the same time as *L. purpureum*. The leaves are rounded and hairy. The tubular, lavender flowers look like tiny chicken heads, complete with a comb and prominent beak. The two species often are found growing together in lawns, fields, and pastures.

Common chickweed (*Stellaria media*) is one of about 100 varieties of chickweed. True chickweeds are European natives that have naturalized in the U.S. The smooth, oval leaves and tiny, star-shaped white flowers appear in cool, spring weather and can't survive hot summer temperatures.

A bane of the turfgrass grower is the dreaded dandelion, (*Taraxacum officinale*), a broadleaf, cool season perennial. The bright yellow heads and pretty puffballs that explode to broadcast hundreds of seeds are a familiar sight in early spring. All parts of young dandelion plants are edible. The flowers provide nectar to honeybees and other beneficial insects.

Another perennial weed is ground ivy or Creeping Charlie (*Glechoma hederacea*), a member of the mint family. It emits a pleasant, minty fragrance when crushed underfoot. The kidney or fan-shaped leaves grow on runners that can reach several feet in length. The dainty lavender flowers bloom in early spring. Ground ivy will grow in sun or shade and will invade a bed or border.

Common yellow woodsorrel (*Oxalis stricta* L.) is one of many species of *Oxalis*. Woodsorrel is a short-lived perennial or warm season annual. The pale green, heart-shaped leaves resemble shamrocks. The bright yellow flowers are pretty. All parts of *Oxalis* contain oxalates, which are mildly toxic to grazing animals. *Oxalis* appears in mid-spring to early summer and lasts until mid-fall.

After you identify weeds growing in your garden, you have to decide what to do. If there are a few unwanted weeds, you can dig them up, preferably before the seeds ripen. A second option is to use chemical herbicides, a choice that is to be approached with much care and attention to package directions to avoid killing more than you planned on.

A final alternative is to enjoy these plants for the springtime color they bring, while controlling them enough to keep them from taking over the yard and garden. All are classified as wildflowers, and the edible ones as herbs. Sometimes a fresh way of looking at something is the best way to handle it.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 430-532 “Spring and Summer Lawn Management Considerations for Cool-Season Turfgrass” offers information on control of broadleaf and grassy weeds. The NC State Extension Plant Database and the University of Maryland Extension Home and Garden Information website page “Lawn Weed Identification” both provide fact sheets with color photos of broadleaf and grassy weeds.

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