

## Weeds from a Different Perspective

By Susan Camp

“What is this stuff?” My friend, John, held out a handful of dainty green leaves attached to a slender vine and bearing lovely, lavender flowers. “It’s vetch,” I responded, “and it will cover everything.” I should know; clouds of the delicate, light green vines cover whole sections of our daylily beds. Pulling vetch out by hand isn’t a difficult task, but it is a thankless one. Vetch seems to spread overnight.

Later in the summer, 1 to 1 ½ inch pods, each containing one or two round, light-brown pea-like seeds, will replace the flowers. This is American, or purple, vetch (*Vicia americana*), a native wildflower. According to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Plant Fact Sheet “Vetch”, it sprouts from seed and spreads through rhizomes that grow from the parent plant to form new plants. American vetch thrives in USDA Cold Hardiness Zones 4 through 7, ranging naturally over much of North America. There are at least 140 species of annual and perennial vetch, native to North America, Asia, and Europe.

Is vetch a weed or a wildflower? It depends on your perspective. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-364 “Weeds in the Home Vegetable Garden” defines a weed as “a plant out of place.” In its native habitat of meadow, mixed forest, roadside, or swampy woodland, American vetch is a lovely wildflower. In a garden bed, it is a weed. American vetch and related species, such as common vetch (*Vicia sativa*) and hairy vetch (*Vicia villosa*) are examples of beneficial plants that become problematic when they grow in the wrong locations.

Is vetch beneficial to the environment? Vetch is a leguminous plant, meaning it has the ability to produce its own nitrogen through a symbiotic relationship with specific bacteria that colonize the plant roots and convert gaseous nitrogen into a form that plants can use. Besides being an excellent, nitrogen-fixing cover crop, vetch provides food for horses, cattle, sheep, deer, small mammals, and birds. It is effective in wildflower meadows and wildlife habitats, attracting butterflies, bees, and many beneficial insects. American vetch is planted along roadsides and near abandoned mines and railroad sidings to help restore disturbed land.

Numerous wildflowers and naturalized ornamentals that have escaped from gardens during the past four centuries fall into the category of weeds with benefits. The University of Maryland Extension Home and Garden Information online publication “Lawn Weed Identification” provides excellent color photographs of common weeds, including basic information on each one. The photo gallery is extensive. Weeds are classified as broadleaf or grassy winter or summer annual weeds and broadleaf or grassy perennial weeds. A separate section is devoted to woody and vining weeds. Control options for each weed are included.

Most gardeners probably think of weeds only in the early morning hours after awakening from a nightmare about endless acres of dandelions and wild onions, but I have to admit to affection for

certain weeds, as long as they stay out of the flowerbeds. I look forward to the little chicken-beaked henbit (*Lamium amplexicaule*) and the nodding heads of purple dead-nettle (*Lamium purpureum*) in late winter and early spring, reminding me that warmer days are coming. I love my wild violets (*Viola odorata*), although even they can become taxing when they invade the beds and borders. I try to look at them as free groundcover. Who doesn't enjoy a bargain?

It seems that most, if not all, plants have a place in the order of the universe, even common weeds. Whether they provide food or habitat, have medical properties, or can do something amazing, like adding nitrogen to the soil, there seems to be a reason for their existence. Except for crabgrass. And nutsedge. And chickweed. They are the stuff of my nightmares.

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