

# Get Rid of Weeds

## Without Toxic Chemicals

A fact sheet from Toxic Free NC

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Weeds are just plants that grow where they're not wanted. They sprout up in gardens and landscaping; in the cracks in sidewalks and playgrounds; and in lawns. Sometimes they just look unattractive; other times, they can harm the "good plants" in our lawns or gardens by competing for space, light, water, and soil nutrients.

There are thousands of varieties of "weeds," and many are actually edible, medicinal, and even beautiful. A small number of weeds can be harmful for people – those include plants with sharp burrs or thorns; and plants that cause skin irritation, such as poison ivy or poison oak. Special care should be taken when dealing with these types of plants: wear gloves, long sleeves and pants tucked into your socks.



### **Prevent weeds from popping up in the first place:**

1. **Keep your "good plants" healthy**, because healthier plants are more resistant to competition from weeds.
  - » Build healthy soil. Have your soil tested to determine what nutrients are needed. Use organic fertilizers, such as compost.
  - » Water regularly, and make sure there's good drainage.
  - » Choose plants for your lawn and garden that are native to your climate.
  - » Carefully follow planting and care guidelines for each type of plant. Plant at the right time of year, and give the right amount of sun and water. Less-than-ideal conditions will make your plants more susceptible to competition from weeds.
  - » Don't mow your lawn too short. 2.5 to 3 inches is the optimal height for most grasses.
2. **Block weeds with mulch.** Shredded leaves, pine needles and tree bark are common mulches. Simply lay a thick layer (about 2 - 4 inches) of mulch over the bare soil, leaving space only for your good plants. The mulch keeps most weeds from sprouting, and keeps the soil from drying out.
3. **Block weeds with paper or plastic barriers.** Newspaper works particularly well in annual gardens, where it blocks weeds for a little while, and then degrades back into the soil. Use a layer 3 – 6 pages thick. In permanent landscaping areas, you can lay down plastic sheets, and put mulch or stones over the top of it to create a more permanent weed barrier.

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4. **Corn gluten meal**, when added to the soil, keeps seeds from sprouting and can be used to prevent weeds. It is a natural by-product of cornstarch manufacturing, and is sold under several brand names, including WeedBan and BioWeed. It lasts for about six weeks, and also adds nitrogen to the soil. The timing of its use is very important – to be effective, it must be used BEFORE weeds sprout, but it must not be used on newly seeded lawns or gardens, because it will keep the “good plants” from sprouting, too.

### **Get rid of weeds without toxic chemicals:**

1. **Pull.** Do it the old-fashioned way: pull them out! Do this after some rain or watering, because the soil is softer and pulling weeds is easier. Many simple tools are available that can help you pull weeds with less effort. Note: weeds can be a great source of organic matter to add to your compost pile, or even just turn under the soil, but be very careful! If the weed has already gone to seed, you may really be causing more problems by replanting the new weed seeds in your garden.
2. **Heat.** If a young weed plant is heated, its cells will burst and the plant will die after a few hours. This is the basic concept behind commercial flame weeders. Boiling water also works well, just be cautious to avoid burns to yourself. A trick to get rid of weeds in the cracks of your driveway or sidewalk is to pour boiling water over them.
3. **Vinegar.** The acetic acid in vinegar kills many weed plants. Just be careful you don't get it on your “good plants,” because it can kill them too! To make an extra powerful weed killer, mix 1 gallon of white vinegar, 1 cup of salt, and 1 tablespoon of dishwashing soap. Put the mixture into a spray bottle, and apply it to the plants you want to kill. Note: this is a very strong weed killer, and will even work on poison ivy! If you use a lot of it and it gets in the soil, nothing will grow in that place for a few months, so be careful not to overdo it.