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Straight Talk about Weeds

Weeds are the plant world's canary in the mine, alerting us that something isn't right with the soil.

Weeds love soil that's compacted (from traffic or poor drainage), poorly fertilized, not pH balanced **and lawns** that are improperly mowed, watered, and seeded.

Hitting weeds with chemicals eliminates them temporarily, but exacerbates the problem by further damaging the soil. Count on it, those weeds will be back! (And so will the chemical truck.)

The best way to combat weeds is through prevention, but there are also some troubleshooting strategies that can help stem the tide. Try the following basics

PREVENTION
1. Mow HIGH: Mow your grass blade to 3". Mowing it short bruises and weakens the grass, opening the door for weeds.HIGH MOWING IS YOUR BEST HERBICIDE.
2. Leave the CLIPPINGS: Grass clippings provide up to 1/3 of the nitrogen (fertilizer) your soil needs for the whole year.Leave them sprinkled on the lawn after mowing. They break down quickly.
3. Water DEEPLY: Shallow watering = shallow roots. Lawns only need 1" of water per week, 2" in high heat. Split into 2 applications, preferably early morning (avoid full sun and dusk), erring on the side of too little water.
4. Aerate & Seed in FALL: Grass doesn't grow in soil, but in the SPACES between the soil. Aerating loosens the soil so the grass has room to grow. Seeding with a combination of at least 4 hardy grass types (ryes and fescues in our area) after aeration is EXCELLENT for weed prevention. Grass is a vigorous plant, and will actually crowd out weeds under good conditions.

TROUBLESHOOTING
1. Vinegar: White vinegar (5% acidic), horticultural vinegar (10%), or pickling vinegar (15%) will kill anything green. Use carefully to spot-treat, or along walkways or patios.
2. Heat: Boiling water poured on weeds can kill them, but if you're looking for something more macho, try a flame weeder!
3. Pulling: I know, I know, but there's nothing as satisfying as pulling a weed from the root, either by hand, or with a nifty device like this one that a friend swears is the most fun and addictive thing ever: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8Bky74_2pM.
4. Organic herbicide: Try BurnOut (by St. Gabriel Organics), which is OMRI certified and pet approved, or one of the many organic spray-bottle formulas out there. You'll have to hunt a little, but every day there are more.

IN CLOSING, REMEMBER: A zero-tolerance for weeds (and bugs) can backfire, since in small numbers they benefit the lawn and ecosystem. Clover gives your lawn nitrogen, crabgrass prevents erosion, dandelions return nutrients to the surface, and plantains are edible! Plus, weeds stay green long after turf goes naturally dormant--a plus in late summer. For more information visit our website at www.pesticidefreenc.org, or email us at pesticidefreenewcanaan@yahoo.com. Happy weeding!