

The Alternative Kitchen Garden

Episode 59 transcript



Hello, and welcome to episode 59 of the Alternative Kitchen Garden. I'm Emma, and today we're going to be talking about weeds, but before that I've got a couple of announcements for you. The first is that this coming Saturday, that's the 29th March, is the day when Earth Hour happens. Earth Hour started in Sydney last year, and basically, during Earth Hour (it's one hour, on Saturday evening) everybody turns off their lights. The idea being that they'll save energy, save carbon dioxide emissions, and ultimately club together and save the planet. So if you want to take part in Earth Hour this year, now that it has gone international, I'll put a link to the website in the show notes for you.

Secondly, I thought those of you in North America may well be interested to learn that Mother Earth News have put up a customer Seed and Plant Finder on their website. Now, the Mother Earth News website is fabulous in itself because you get an archive of all their articles, so you can look up lots of stuff on growing things, eating things and generally living a sustainable lifestyle. And now they've come up with this custom seed and plant finder, so if you're having trouble tracking down a particular variety of seed, or a plant, then pop it in to their search box and see whether you can find a supplier. So that's a fabulous new tool from Mother Earth News and, again, a put a link to that in the show notes for you.

So...weeds. Weeds are one of the biggest banes in a gardener's life. They can really make your life a misery. People define weeds in different ways, but some of the more pleasant ways are to call them plants that are growing in the wrong place, or plants whose virtues have yet to be discovered. That's a nice way of saying it, but if you've got one in your garden that you're battling against, then you're not going to be that well-disposed towards it.

Obviously, in an organic garden you can't really get away with herbicides and weed killers, so how do you deal with weeds in an organic garden? Well, it depends a bit

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on what you've got. Weeds, like all other plants, can be either annual - that means that they complete their entire lifecycle within one growing season, so they grow from seed, they flower and they set seeds themselves before the year is over. And in some cases it can be several times before the year is over; if you get a good season for weeds they can make several generations. The biggest problem weeds are generally perennials, so they live for several years and if you don't deal with them when they're young they get increasingly difficult to get rid of as they get older.

The problem with weeds is that they're fast-growing, they're fast to reproduce, if they make seeds they make a lot of seeds and they're generally very long-lived. So even if they get buried in the soil, when you dig them up they will start to grow. And a lot of the perennials can re-grow from tiny sections of root. They have this regeneration thing going on, so it's all a bit of a nightmare.

So there are lots of techniques you can use to reduce weeds or get rid of weeds, but it depends really on identifying what you've got and the best way of dealing with it. With perennial weeds, in many cases, your only option is to dig them out. Things like bindweed and brambles, they will not die until you dig the roots out. And you have to be very careful when you're doing it. Bindweed, and other plants like it that regenerate from tiny sections of root, you have to get it out. The only plus side in this is that roots are quite pale compared to the soil, so you can see what you're digging up usually. But you may have to sift through the soil several times to get rid of an infestation of perennial weeds. Once it's done though, it's done.

And once it is done, you might like to consider No Dig gardening. In fact, probably once you've dug out something like bindweed, you'll be a big fan of No Dig gardening after that! The idea with No Dig gardening is that you stop disturbing the soil. Once you've got rid of the perennial roots you stop disturbing the soil and therefore you stop bringing weed seeds to the surface. And you also apply soil improvers and mulches to the surface and that helps to prevent weed seeds from germinating. So once you've dug out the perennials, No Dig gardening is a good way of reducing your weed problems.

I've already mentioned mulching. Putting soil improvers and organic mulches on the surface is a great way of improving the soil and it can cut down on your weed problems. If you want to use mulching as a way to kill weeds then you have to be very careful that your mulch is completely light-excluding. And one of the best ways to do that is to use black plastic sheeting - not the most environmentally friendly thing in the world, but it is reusable so it's probably better than weed killer. What you do is you lay down black plastic sheeting, you do it very carefully so that there are no gaps between it, and you leave it down for a very long time. After about a year you'll have killed off all the easy weeds, and after about two you may well have killed off the rest. But it will be a long time and it does look horrible when it's down. You have to weight it down, as well, or it blows around in the breeze, and any gaps that appear have to be covered over or the weeds will just make a break for freedom.

When you're creating a seed bed for sowing seeds in, if you can do it a couple of weeks in advance of sowing your seeds what you're doing is creating a Stale Seedbed.

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So you prepare it to the point where you're ready to sow your seeds, but then you wait. And all the weed seeds that you've brought to the surface will germinate and then you can hoe them off while they're seedlings and then sow your seeds - so that you know that what's coming up is your seedlings rather than any of the weeds. And if you minimize soil disturbance from then on then you won't have many weed seeds coming up between them.

Of course you can get down on your knees and do a lot of hand weeding, that's always fun. Good for things like dandelions, where they grow as individual plants, although again you might have trouble getting the roots out.

The reason that gardeners hate weeds so much is that they compete with plants for nutrients, water, light, absolutely anything. Something like bindweed literally clambers over all the other plants in its vicinity and tries to strangle them to death. So you want to pull them up and get rid of them where they're competing with your plants. They are also vectors for pests and disease, so they're not great things to have in your vegetable garden. Your neighbours won't like them either, but some weeds do have a genuine wildlife value, and so if you've got some sheltered areas of your garden where people aren't going to be complaining about weeds it might be worth letting some of the less rampant ones survive so that you've got some wildlife value going on in the quiet corners of your garden.

To give you an example from my garden, when we moved in here the back garden was laid down to a very ropey old lawn that had been very much neglected and also dug up quite a lot by dogs. It was very uneven, very tufty, pretty ropey actually and also infested with bindweed. And where the lawn stopped at the back of the garden there was a bramble thicket that Sleeping Beauty's prince would have had trouble getting through. It was absolutely fabulous. So when we tackled the garden we looked at it and... basically we couldn't fact it. So we actually put down a black plastic mulch, as previously mentioned, over the lawn area. And it did look horrible, but it looked better than the weeds! And after about a year, the grass had mostly died. You peeled it back and you got the occasional tuft of rotting grass, mostly bare soil, but what you could see were the long bleached tendrils of bindweed that were still growing, still trying to find their way out. So we pulled up the ones of those we could see (it made them very easy to see) put the black plastic back for about another year and that pretty much did for the bindweed.

Although, it has to be said, when I made my raised beds I did weed control fabric (that's permeable weed control fabric, that lets water through) - I put that down underneath because the bindweed is still down there and I'm not entirely convinced that it's dead. So in the areas where there was bindweed, there has been a weed excluding mulch down for a very long time in my garden, and that seems to have done the trick.

The brambles, however, required a more hands-on approach. With brambles, the best thing to do is just hack them down and then dig out the roots. And with an infestation as bad as mine it is a long, long process. The problem with brambles is that whenever a stem grows, if you let it, it will root and make another plant. So you have to keep

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chopping them back and then digging them out. It's a very prickly business, so get some very hefty gloves if you have brambles in your garden and don't even think about composting them because they're too prickly! The stems will compost down and you'll be left with the prickles, which I think are indestructible.

So the weeds are pretty much under control in my garden now, but it has taken about five years. Patience is a virtue when we're dealing with weeds.

I've mentioned a few weeds, the ones that have been a bane in my life, but there are of course others. You get dandelions, that set a lot of seeds but are perennial plants with very brittle roots and you'll be digging those up. In fact I had a dandelion infestation in my garden and at one point I thought that all of the dandelions in my garden were actually connected together and that it was just one giant plant that kept springing up in different areas of the garden. It was quite scary.

You get docks, another one with brittle roots, and couch grass. Lots of people complain about couch grass; I haven't had the misfortune to have it. And ground elder, horsetail, thistles are always fun - another prickly plant that's very difficult to get rid of. One of the big ones in the UK is an introduced plant, called Japanese Knotweed, that was introduced because it was pretty and people thought it was very ornamental. But it grows like wildfire and the roots go pretty much down to the centre of the Earth and it's almost impossible to get rid of.

I have had an email from Joanna, in Michigan. The bane of her weeding life is a weed called Creeping Charlie - not one that I've heard of, but it's a perennial in the mint family and it loves moist, shady spots. It was introduced as a ground cover for shady spots and unfortunately it grows only too well. And because it's a mint and it's got those creeping stems that we all love so much, that make mint a bit of a pest wherever you grow it, that's very difficult to get rid of. I do sympathise with you, Joanna! She's sent us in a link to a nice page about Creeping Charlie, so if it's one of the ones that's a problem in your garden, check out the show notes for that link.

So when you're dealing with weeds in the garden, once you've pulled them up, once you've dug them out, what do you do with them? Well, unless you have the world's best compost heap, I would avoid composting them. If you can send them off for community composting, where the temperatures are high and everything gets killed off - weed seeds, perennial roots, the works - then do that. If you're immensely thrifty and you hate throwing any garden waste away then you should compost your weeds separately. You should put them into something like a black plastic sack, where they cannot escape, put them somewhere sunny and then leave them for at least a year so that they are dead, dead, dead before you try to make compost. They may turn into compost on their own in the sack over the course of the year, or after a year you may think that they're safe enough to add to your compost heap, but don't put them on there when there's even the slightest chance that they're alive because they'll grow in your compost heap and it will be a nightmare.

Of course, if you live in an area where you are allowed to have a bonfire and burn things then you might like to do that. Then you can put the ash around your plants or

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on the compost heap. Some weeds have a value as Dynamic Accumulators. Those long roots that make them such a problem go right down into the subsoil and bring nutrients up. Nettles are good one for this and if you chop down the top growth of nettles you can safely compost that and it will add all those nutrients to the compost heap. So weeds can be useful, but you have to be careful with them.

If you can't compost them and you don't want to burn them, then dispose of them safely. Just put them in the bin - it's one of those small eco-sins that we'll let you get away with because in the long term it will be better.

OK, so now we've thoroughly slated weeds and talked about how hard they are to get rid of and how you might want to go about it, Madeleine from Mad About Herbs is here with some uses for your weeds. So to help you see weeds in a softer light, here's Madeleine.

Hello, this is Madeleine Giddens from Mad About Herbs. I couldn't resist contributing to this podcast about weeds. Weeds are probably defined as plants that are in a place you don't want them to be, or that you just don't find attractive or useful. I wanted to give you a few uses for what most people would call weeds, and that I would consider to be useful plants or herbs.

The first one is dandelions. The young leaves, that are just appearing now where I live in the south of England, are a healthy addition to salads or you can use them in stir-fries or add them to quiches. Basically treat them as a salad leaf. If the leaves are fully grown, or getting a bit old, then they're not going to be that nice - they're going to be a bit bitter - so it's best to pick the very young leaves. You can also add them to soups.

Last year I made dandelion syrup, which had a kind of vanilla flavour - I was quite surprised how nice it was. And that was quite easy to make, basically it's a sugar syrup and the yellow flower petals. I picked about 70 dandelion heads to make that, all from our back lawn. You can also deep fry them in batter, which is not something I've tried and not particularly healthy, but apparently that's nice. Dandelions obviously stain your hands when you pick them, so if you don't like that kind of thing you might want to wear gloves when you're harvesting them. You can also make dandelion coffee, or dandelion flower wine.

Another plant that you might think of as a weed is nettles. I mentioned nettles last time - a great compost activator and also good for attracting wildlife, including ladybirds and butterflies. By nettles I mean the stinging nettle, but you can also use the red dead nettle or the white dead nettle. The best time to pick them is when the young shoots are only a couple of inches high, or you can just pick the tops if you're harvesting them later on. They're just starting to appear now and you need to remove any tough stems before you cook them. Nettles can be eaten as a vegetable, just simmer them for about 10 minutes, they will need a bit of seasoning because they're not a particularly strong flavour. One of my favourite ways to use nettles is to make a nettle soup, which is a very nutritious soup. Nettles are high in iron and other trace elements. I also drink nettle tea, but I do buy that in its dried form, because that's much easier.

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We've got a patch of nettles on our allotment, next to the compost bins, which is handy for harvesting them when I do make nettle soup and also to throw on the compost heap when we do cut them down.

Another plant that might be regarded as a weed is hedge or garlic mustard and this can also be used in salads. You can just pick the top shoots and the upper leaves in March or April when the flowers are in bud. It has an oniony flavour, so basically you can make a weed salad if you like from all these different plants. Obviously you don't want to eat nettles raw in a salad, they will sting.

Also, when you're harvesting you need to make sure that you're picking from an area that hasn't been polluted in any way. For example by weed killers or pesticides, next to a farmer's field or on a busy roadside. And you need to make sure you're correctly identifying the plants if you don't know them very well already. A good book is 'Wild Food' by Roger Phillips.

And at this time of year you can also add to your salads primrose and violet flowers, they're both edible flowers and they make a very colourful salad. I hope you've enjoyed this information. If you'd like to find out more about herbs and receive a monthly newsletter you can visit www.madaboutherbs.co.uk.

Now that you know all about weeds it's time to get out in the garden and actually deal with them before they become too much of a pest this year. Get a good head start and it will stand you in good stead. So that's it from me for this week. Don't forget you can leave me a comment on the show home page, which is coopette.com/akg, you can send me an email to akgpodcast@gmail.com, or you can join in the discussion on the Facebook group and I'll put a link to that in the show notes. You can send me hints and tips, a story about the weeds in your garden, anything that you want to share with the other listeners. In the meantime, have a great week in your garden. Goodbye.

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