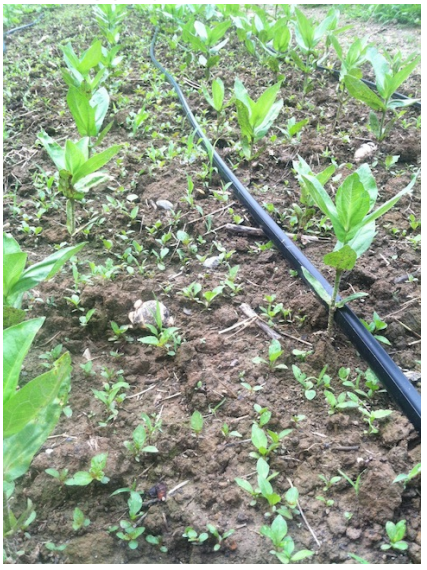
Organic Weed Control

Weeds. We've all got them. Organic gardening in southern Appalachia could easily be likened to waging war, especially in the height of August. What are the best tricks organic gardeners use to manage weeds? And if you don't outsmart them all together, what happens when they become unmanageable? One word. MULCH. Mulch is your friend.

- Mulch helps maintain soil temperature and moisture.
- Wait to mulch your summer veggies until the soil warms up, and be sure to mulch when the soil is moist.
- Cover the soil about 2 inches thick with whatever mulch material you choose.
- Here at OGS, we adore wheat straw, with its airy, hollow stems. And it looks great, too!
- Wheat straw can be turned into the soil at the end of the season, contributing to soil organic matter content, and eliminating the problem of pests overwintering in your mulch.
- Cardboard is another option. It's recycled, usually free, and earthworms love to bore around under it and through its corrugated insides. Be sure to use unwaxed cardboard only.
- Other options include hay (beware weed seeds), compost, and leaves.

Some growers in these parts use woven landscape fabric that can be re-used year after year. Check out this Ask Tom article for commercial growers to see how the pros are using landscape fabric with vegetables. One gripe about woven fabric is that if weed seeds blow in on top of it, they will absolutely germinate and root right through the fabric, into the ground underneath. Trust us, pulling weeds is no fun already, but pulling weeds from fabric is even harder. Other folks use plastic or old carpet (or anything) that will cover the soil. We'd caution growers to think critically about the resource used on the home scale, and lean towards the recycled, less wasteful products made from renewable resources. Also, consider the components that make up your mulch. Do you want old carpet decomposing in your food garden? Depending on the size of your

garden, mulching the whole thing may not be realistic. And even if you do mulch, some weeding is inevitable. Here are the best tips to remember when tackling weeding projects:



- A stitch in time saves nine, so get them when they're small. Also, small weeds are easier to remove than big weeds.
- Learn to differentiate your worst weed seedlings and your crop seedlings.
- Weed-eater…YES That's OK! Again, August can be scary.
- Mow before weeds are able to set seed.
- Moisten the soil first.
- Loosen weeds with fork in manageable blocks, and then pull them.
- Tool suggestions –hoes, hand mattock, hori hori knife
- Tackle job in small manageable increments (20 minutes a day?).
- There's a high rate of job satisfaction when accomplished!
- If weeds have seeds, don't compost unless you are managing a HOT compost pile.
- Some growers who have plenty of space just make the pathways in their garden wide enough to accommodate the lawn mower, so they can keep the paths clipped and clean, and only worry about weeds in the garden beds.
- Cover crops that are quick to germinate (buckwheat is great in the summer) will outcompete weed seeds in open garden spaces.

THINKING LONG TERM Your relationship with your garden weeds will be long and intimate. Learn about their life cycles, preferences, and (yes) their beneficial traits. Weeds can teach you more than you would believe. For example, a plethora of lambsquarter is not only edible, but also tells you that you have fertile soil. Polygonum grows where soil is moist. Knowing your weed species can also help you eliminate them. Is your weed a perennial weed (coming back year after year, like dandelion), or an annual weed (dies every winter, like lambsquarter)? How does it reproduce (do you have to worry only about it going to seed, or does it send out runners underground as well)? You'll always have a bank of weed seeds in your soil. Your long term goals are

1. Don't add to it, if you can help it, and
2. Don't spark germination. Some weed seeds, for example, have been in the soil for many, many years, but won't germinate until they are brought into the light, scratched, or broken. In this case, the more your till your garden, the more you encourage weed growth.

Thinking long term, your best weed plan might look like this:

- **Goal One:** Work towards establishing permanent beds throughout the garden

- **Goal Two:** Reduce tillage through the use of mulching, raised beds, hand tool cultivation, and compost application
- **Goal Three:** Get mulching. Every bed, every season.
- **Goal Four:** Use cover cropping to your advantage. Choose species that will grow fast and beat the weeds in the race upward, toward sunlight.
- **Goal Five:** Get the right tools. A weeding project with the right tools can really speed up your work and allow you to get the weeds from the root, so you're not back in the same weed patch next weekend. (We love hori hori knives, groundhogs or hand mattocks, stirrup hoes, standard hoes, and diamond hoes.)

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