

Weed Management in COGS Community Gardens

This paper addresses weed management for COGS Community Gardens.

Two requirements

Two key requirements for participating in a COGS garden is that the gardeners follow organic principles and garden cooperatively with other plot holders. Both of these requirements are very important.

- Before we discuss organic methods for removing weeds, it is useful to step back and consider what is a weed.

Weeds in context

Bearing in mind, for example, that some people claim to enjoy nettle soup, it is possible that what one person sees as an unattended plot covered in nettles is what another person is counting on for soup. This paper is not intended to produce a strict list of what plants must be removed as a weed, but it is intended to provide guidance. In the case of the nettle example, if a gardener allows his or her plot to support nettles then that can be tolerated (if the nettles are going to be used as a food plant) but is not recommended. Nettles seed vigorously, and your adjoining neighbours will not want to find nettles in their own plots. No one enjoys being stung by nettles. So, for the purposes of this paper a weed is a plant that is not welcome on a gardener's plot, because it doesn't produce food, wasn't planted by the gardener and competes for water, space and nutrients with the gardener's food crops.

Some weeds listed and removal considered

In Canberra gardens, weeds include dandelions, oxalis, capeweed, couch grass and various other grasses. Some weeds proliferate by seeding, some spread across the ground and paths and some do both. As the goal of having a COGS plot is to produce organic crops, gardeners will have to consider weeding at some times. Organic methods ¹ include:

- Hoeing or digging the plant and taking its roots out of the ground.
- Hand weeding with the same result.
- Hoeing the plant by slicing the head off the plant but allowing the roots to remain.
- Pouring boiling water on individual plants.
- Mulching.
- Using tools such as a weed burner.
- Using organic herbicides registered under the Australian Certified Organic (ACO) standard.

All these methods have pro and cons and indeed, any particular method may be useful at one time but not at another. Gardeners have to make their own decision about which method to use and when to use it. For example, you may wish to vigorously hoe down the unwelcome spring weed proliferation, but if you then plant crops you can't necessarily hoe again as you may damage your early crops. Don't dig out your seedlings! Obviously, you cannot use tools such as weed burners during fire restriction days. Don't burn your seedlings! Although there are registered organic herbicides, because they work by contact, you would have to apply them very carefully when you also have crops growing (or your neighbour does). Don't poison your seedlings.

The COGS Executive Committee has reviewed the conditions under which ACO registered herbicides may be used in COGS community gardens. Under the ACO standard, registered organic herbicides are

¹ Another organic method to start preparing a new or weedy patch of ground can involve covering the ground with thick layers of paper or plastic to smother the weeds/grass first. This is more about preparation rather than weeding for maintenance so isn't discussed in this paper.

permitted in crop production provided they are only used as part of an integrated weed management program, which includes physical controls such as cultivation. The General Garden Rules in the COGS Constitution, however, does not allow the use of any herbicides at all on garden plots. COGS permits the use of ACO registered organic herbicides in common areas of a community garden (eg pathways) provided their use is approved by the relevant garden committee and is compliant with the restrictions in the ACO standard (noted above). Registered organic herbicides are only to be used as a last resort and are subject to strict conditions of usage including application and clean up to fully protect garden plots and minimise risks to soil life (eg earthworms).

Bearing this in mind, this is a story about weeding. In late winter, before it is really warm enough to start spring/summer crops is a good time to prepare your plot for the growing season and that preparation includes weeding. Many people either hoe or dig weeds at that point as access is easy as many people don't have substantial winter crops and you can also dig in compost to prepare for spring planting.

Also, this is probably the best time should a gardener wish to apply an organic herbicide to particularly persistent weeds, such as couch and oxalis, in common areas are less likely to be damaged by drift.

Importantly, should a plot holder wish to use an ACO registered organic herbicide, they must first obtain the approval of their garden committee and agree to comply with the COGS approved usage guidelines, which their garden convenor will provide them.

After you have removed or treated weeds and added soil improvers you are ready for planting. Plant what you wish and consider applying mulch. Mulch is useful not least because it lessens evaporation from the soil and slows fresh weed germination. However, it does protect slaters and other insects which may damage your seedlings. How and when you apply mulch is up to the personal preference of gardeners but bear in mind it is one of the weed management strategies.

When crops become more established you still have to stay on top of weeds, and at that point you are best served by careful hand weeding, as that will cause least damage to your burgeoning crops. Also at this point your plants have survived slater attack when they were seedlings and you can reply mulch.

And then there is the harvest! The purpose of this story is to advise that there are several organic weeding methods which will be useful at various stages of a growing year. Gardeners should choose from those methods, bearing in mind that they have to be responsible and considerate of other gardeners.

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