

Managing weeds

Weeds compete with vegetables for water, light, and nutrients. Some also harbor pests or diseases that can harm garden crops. By controlling weeds, you'll give your plants a better chance to grow and produce to their potential. Several methods of controlling weeds in vegetable gardens are described below.

Mulching

Organic mulches help control weeds and also improve the soil as they break down. If applied in a 4-inch layer or more, however, they sometimes produce acids that can hurt plants. A few types of leaves, such as walnut, can inhibit growth of crop plants and seeds.

Plastic mulch also works well. Black plastic reduces light to the soil, thus preventing weed growth. Clear plastic warms the soil faster than black plastic but does not control weeds. Put drip irrigation hoses in place before laying down the plastic. Make slits in the plastic, add fertilizer, and place transplants next to the water source.

Landscape fabric is another option. Because it allows moisture to pass through, it doesn't require a drip system. However, it is thicker than plastic and tends to cool the soil instead of warming it.

Water management

Weeds need water to germinate and grow. Sprinklers water a large area, all of which must be weeded. Drip irrigation delivers water only where you want it; the rest of the garden stays dry, and weed problems are reduced.

Cultivation

Germinating weeds are very vulnerable to hoeing, hand pulling, or tilling. Mature weeds are more difficult to remove. Weed early and often.

Tillers are practical only in large, open areas. They can damage roots or stems if used close to crop plants. Thus, hand weeding and hoeing are the best choices for close weeding. Hand pulling works well in small gardens and raised beds. A scuffle hoe is preferred for larger areas.

Landscape fabrics are another option for weed control. They deprive weeds of the light they need to grow.



Pull or hoe weeds when the soil is damp, but not wet. Working wet soil damages soil structure. Conversely, when soil is too dry, weeds are hard to remove.

Several hoe styles are available. The lightweight Warren type of hoe has a heart-shaped blade and is useful for cultivating between plants. The hula or action hoe is a lightweight scuffle hoe. Pushing and pulling it just under the soil surface eliminates newly emerging weeds. It is less effective against well-established weeds.



Transplants have a head start against germinating weed seeds.

Small hand cultivators are good for weeding small areas and between closely spaced plants. Another useful tool is the dandelion digger (also known as a weeder, cultivator, or asparagus knife). It is indispensable for digging weeds with long taproots. It consists of a 10- to 14-inch metal rod with a two-pronged blade at one end and a handle at the other.

Rotation

Crop rotation can reduce weed problems. Plant aggressive vegetables (such as winter squash or corn) where noncompetitive crops (such as carrots and onions) grew the year before. Keeping part of the garden clean-tilled or in a summer cover crop can help reduce weed problems for the next season.

Using transplants

Many vegetables can be started indoors or purchased as young plants and then set out into the garden. The transplant has a head start against germinating weed seeds.

Close spacing

Closely spaced vegetables shade the soil and suppress weeds. Remember, however, that weeding must be done by hand when plants are close together.

Cover crops

Cover crops grown on annual beds in the winter can smother much winter weed growth. The cover crop can be a winter-hardy grain, a legume, or a combination of the two.