

WEEDS

A weed is normally definable as one of three types;

1. A wild species; native to the particular soil, climate and geography.
2. A wild species; not native but pioneering, possibly accidentally introduced, or garden escape.
3. A cultivated species; regrown or self-sown where no longer required.

Many conventional gardening authorities will tell you that weeds are "baddies" to be eradicated ruthlessly. Whilst it is true that weeds can be serious competitors with our cultivated crops for water, nutrients and light, and considered to play host to pests and diseases, it is important to acquire a more complex, informed and holistic view of weeds for successful organic cultivation; there are no organic herbicides, only the mechanical methods of hand and hoe!

However, it is more than a mere accomodation with the inevitable presence of weeds that is sought by the conscientious grower; hence the following list of benefits that pertain to weeds:

BENEFITS

- I The vigour and variety of weeds can provide useful clues to the make up and condition of the soil. (c.f. "Using Weeds as Soil Indicators")
- I Many weeds are deep rooting (dock, dandelion), exploring subsoils and thereby enlarging potential root zone for cultivated crops. Deep-rooters counteract panning.
- I Deep-rooting weeds also collect valuable leached nutrients and stores of minerals from sub-soil levels. Many weeds specialise in accumulating those elements in low supply (E.g. daisies collect calcium in acid soils), thereby helping to heal abused soils and bring them closer to their natural, balanced state. Compost the weeds to recycle these resources.
- I Some weed species have the capacity to collect excess salts, binding them organically and thereby rendering them insoluble.
- I Weeds provide a useful ground cover: Protecting topsoil from compaction and erosion as a result of hard rain, frost, wind and sun-baking.
- I It is possible that the capillary action of water along the roots of weeds helps maintain moisture levels in the topsoil during periods of drought.
- I Root exudations and chelates aid a variety of soil organisms, and deter some undesirables.
- I Leguminous species (e.g. clover) collect nitrogen from the atmosphere and store it in root nodules, available to other plants upon decomposition.
- I When clearing a new patch of ground covered in grasses and perennial weeds, stack the material as though making compost and cover to prevent regrowth. After a year or so the material will be loamy and finely textured, suitable as a base material for potting mixes and container growing.
- I Some weeds function well as companion plants, improving the flavour and yield of the cultivated crop. (For example, nettles, yarrow and chamomile improve flavours of many

culinary herbs; dead nettles, sowthistles and yarrow are generally good companions in the vegetable patch.)