



Growing Guru



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WHEN IS A WEED A WEED?

All gardeners must deal with weeds, and I just counted over 30 kinds in my yard, but what classifies plants as weeds? Does having the word "weed" in their common name make you think of them as a weed? See how many you can think of before reading this [article from NYBG Plant Talk](#) for some examples. I also thought of a few more.

My preferred definition for a weed is a plant growing in a place where I don't want it or growing more abundantly than I would like. I admit there are plants that I have introduced intentionally into my garden and now view them as weeds, including lemon balm, Jerusalem artichoke (a native sunflower), Japanese lantern, and spearmint. On the other hand, I don't mind the rose campion, sweet William catchfly, and herb Robert that germinate any place where there is bare soil. The annuals are certainly easier to remove than the perennials when I decide they need to go.

When I first came to Massachusetts, I was fascinated by a vine growing in my yard that had flowers like a milkweed. Little did I know it was black swallow-wort, a plant on the [Massachusetts Prohibited Plant List](#). You must dig out the roots to eliminate it. Otherwise it will just sprout again.



I really like violets because my grandmother's name was Viola (the genus of violets) and my sons would pick the blooms for me for Mother's Day. Violets took over areas where the grass had died because of drought (I don't water lawns). I moved some to pots that overwinter quite well and dug out the rest.



The best way that I have found to deal with weeds is to use mulch (leaves, bark, untreated grass clippings) to discourage sprouting, because many weed species need bare soil and direct sunlight to germinate. I also try to "weed" them early while the plants are small, roots are shallow, and before they have a chance to produce more seeds.

For help in identifying weeds, the [UMass Weed Herbarium](#) is helpful with lots of photographs and descriptions, as is this [Better Homes & Gardens](#) article. I have 23 of the 34 weeds described. This list of [Common Weeds of Massachusetts](#) is organized by plant family, with common & scientific names, and whether annual or perennial.