

## New Weeds in the Garden

By Susan Camp

By every August, the front garden is pretty untidy. The weather has been too hot, too dry, too wet, or too buggy since mid-July, and my daily work sessions in the flowerbeds have dwindled from every available morning to once a week if I am lucky.

I have said before that I enjoy weeding, and I do, but once I start to miss my regular weeding sessions, the weeds take note and begin ramping up their activities.

Weeds often are described as “plants out of place,” growing where they aren’t wanted. Weeds compete with garden plants for water, light, soil nutrients, and space.

Some garden weeds are beneficial. Joe-Pye weed and dandelions provide nectar for bees and butterflies. Other weeds provide habitat for beneficial insects, or, like common milkweed, serve as larval hosts for certain species of butterflies. Some weeds produce edible greens or fruit.

Whether they provide food or habitat, have medical or cosmetic properties, or can do something amazing, like adding nitrogen to the soil, there seems to be a reason for their existence.

I had become somewhat fond of my old weed friends, but some strangers moved into town about three years ago, and I am ready to escort them to the county line.

Garden Enemy #1 on my list is mulberryweed (*Fatoua villosa*). Several years ago, mulberryweed was named a “Dirty Dozen” plant by Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden. The East Asia native began appearing in greenhouses and nurseries in the 1960s, and has spread throughout the East Coast. It is often introduced into home gardens with newly purchased plants.

This annual summer weed is a member of the mulberry family and resembles a mulberry sapling except that its serrated triangular leaves are sticky and covered with small hairs. Small purple flower clusters that later turn brown bloom in the leaf axils. Seeds explode forcefully, and mulberryweed will continue to flower from early spring to late fall. It will die after the first frost.

Mulberry weed grows in moist soil in dappled sunlight to full shade, making it difficult to find under other plants. Pull it out as soon as you see it.

Garden Enemy #2 is chamber bitter (*Phyllanthus urinaria*), another Asian native with a long history of medicinal use for bladder, kidney, liver, and other health problems.

Sometimes called “little mimosa” for its resemblance to mimosa seedlings, this pretty, dark green weed with oblong leaves can grow into a one-to-two-foot mound with a long taproot. Small, round, warty-looking fruits sprout on the undersides of leaves. The seeds are forcefully expelled from the fruit and remain viable underground through the winter. Chamber bitter grows in full sun to light shade.

Garden Enemy #3 is the most innocuous of the newcomer weeds. It probably has been here all along, but it isn't showy and doesn't take up much room. Nimblewill (*Muhlenbergia schreberi*) is a native, perennial, warm season grass with a fine texture. It produces silky, purplish-green spikelets in the fall, and is sold as a warm season grass. It reproduces by seeds and root-forming stolons.

The best methods to rid your lawn and beds of weeds are prevention and good cultural practices. Weed your garden early in the season before weeds have a chance to mature and set seeds. Clean tools after weeding to prevent transferring tiny seeds to other parts of the garden. Dispose of garden debris by burning or bagging, and don't put weeds in your compost bin. Mulch beds and borders to prevent weed growth.

The University of Maryland Extension Home & Garden Information Center and the NC State Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox websites contain photo galleries of weeds commonly found in our region, as does the Clemson University Extension. Plant ID apps allow you to snap a photo of a weed with your smart phone for immediate identification. The percentage of accuracy varies from app to app, and some sites charge a fee, so it pays to investigate before you download.