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Dahlia Talk *from tubers to blooms*



Garden of Weedin'

by Martin Král

About the time the first crocus appears next to dahlia rows, the tiny rosettes of shotweed herald the spring - and so the annual cycle of weeding begins. Shotweed (or bittercress) is an almost unobtrusive invader. Ignore it at your peril. Two weeks later its slender raceme stem sports tiny flowers. If you don't pull the weed right away, it quickly sets seed that explosively discharge if touched.

George Washington Carver observed that a "weed is just a plant out of place." This benign definition is defied by many gardeners whose back-breaking efforts to control undesirable plants every year remind us of the Sisyphian myth of a never-ending chore. Every region has its own punishers, and every gardener has stories of their impotence against the weeds' fecundity.

It seems that Nature has outfitted weeds with special tools to ensure their survival. Be it the dandelion with its impressive fly-away seed heads, or the bindweed and its tendrils and stolons, rhizomatous grasses, the low-creeping purslane, or giant hogweed with its impressive umbel - the garden year starts **right now!** Weeds quickly will take over the dahlia garden, stealing the nutrients, the moisture, and often the sunlight that was meant for desirable plants. That competition also stresses these, leaving them weakened and makes them prone to diseases and pests hiding among the plants.

Efforts to eradicate (or control) weeds usually start with pulling them one by one. Best done right after rain, some come along easily, but others have obstinate root systems that require grubbing and digging with trowels or even a spade. As soon as an area is cleared, though, new starts emerge to challenge the sore gardener. In despair, some of us have sought to eradicate all growth ahead of planting dahlias by resorting to tilling with a Mantis cultivator or roto-tillers that turn over the soil to some depth, chopping and burying those weedy patches. Warning: do that at your peril if plants with stolons or deep tap roots live in the plot. Chopping these up just creates more weeds.

OK, then, pulling a weed here or there may satisfy some desire for good yard appearance. What about a bed now carpeted in weedy profusion? For obvious reasons, herbicides are no solutions in flower gardens. Home remedies like vinegar are caustic and often only briefly effective, since acetic acid in that concentration is too weak for all but broadleaf weeds. Hoes, rakes, and weeders at least clear the surface growth with some manual effort (but leave the unseen seeds below ground to rise again).

That world below is a microbial and bacterial universe that deserves not to be disturbed. In *The Hidden Half of Nature: The Microbial Roots of Life and Health*, the local author couple Dr. David Montgomery and Anne Bikle explore that underground kingdom. It follows Montgomery's important work *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*, where the geomorphologist details the importance of soil to human survival. I was struck by his assertion that it takes 500 years to create one inch of topsoil. It is a sobering reminder to safeguard the thin shell of substrate without which plants, animals, AND humans could not co-exist.

All the more to avoid chemical controls that soak into the ground. All the more to consider mulch to cover the dahlia bed over the winter and maybe even during the growing season. Some advocate a cover with newspaper or cardboard to prevent weed growth. These must be removed before setting out the dahlias and so may inhibit weed growth. Advocates of landscape fabric and visqueen boast of near-perfect ground covers to contain weeds. But after several seasons, the plastic breaks down, seeds invade soil shoveled atop to prevent the covers blowing away, so the best use for this is lining the walkways between dahlia rows, as many growers have learned.

So is there any relief from the arduous grubbing with hand tools to best persistent weeds? Look at it beneficially - your dahlia plot will thrive and so will you: Shotweed actually is not bitter; like purslane it can be harvested for a salad. Dandelion has skincare benefits, and clover (a legume) has nitrogen-fixing bacteria that enrich the soil!

Australian video on weeding <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zNij-aGpVw>



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Take a look at Larry Smith's video on the [ADS photo contest](#). Plan to enter your photos and your dahlias!



Dahlia Talk Co-Authors Martin Kral and Dianne Reitan
at the 2023 ADS Show in Portland

American Dahlia Society

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