

The Fine Art of Weeding

Although we know a cover of weeds protects the good earth against erosion and can be turned under to act as green manure, we wage war on these 'plants in the wrong place'. Once planted with flowers, you can protect your bed by never deep digging to expose more weed seeds to light and by mulching every inch except where you want a favorite larkspur or love-in-a-mist to reseed.

Garden gifts often come in book form and one of the most intriguing books I have was first published in 1894, "An Island Garden" by Celia Thaxter. The lighthouse island off the coast of New England had a garden 50 ft. long and 15 ft. wide and the love story of its development fill 126 pages. Equally remarkable it is that an exquisite garden can be produced in the short season on a storm-lashed island.

Celia Thaxter takes great pains to describe the ritual she performs in weeding her garden. One must remember that in the 1890s ladies wore voluminous skirts possibly with large aprons to protect those skirts. Situating oneself on the ground in proximity to the weeds would be an endeavor! Thaxter laid two boards near the plot to be weeded, a piece of carpet becomes a kneeling pad and another scrap of carpet cushions the elbow when only crawling into the garden will get the job done.

Comprised as a daily log of garden activity, nothing in the book gives a hint of any life aside from the garden. She does mention leaving the island in fall and returning from Portsmouth, N. H. on the first of April. When she returns to the island, flats of seedlings and houseplants take the ten-mile sea voyage with her.

We each have our own tools and techniques for getting rid of weeds. Men with rows of corn in their home garden will either space the rows to allow a tiller to be run between them or, if more closely planted, will attack the weeds with a hoe, leaving the uprooted offenders to wither in the sun. Women tend to adopt more persnickety rituals.

Actually most women love to weed: perhaps it is an escape from those endless inside chores, an escape into early morning quiet broken by buzzing, chirping, and birdsong not the frantic pings and rings of the electronic world. Unless you have exceptional vision, you kneel, the better to differentiate one sprout from another. Pads help, the thicker the better. After decades of weeding those knees may rebel forcing the eager weeder to shift to low seats. That frame with kneeler that can be turned over to become a seat is handy, especially on level ground. On a slope or an area where the ground is uneven, the device may tip you into the weed patch. In such places, a stool is safer.

About tools there is little agreement. Each gardener will argue the merits of one over another. One friend expertly uses what looks like an asparagus harvester, a long slim handle with a forked 'knife' on the end. It doesn't work the same magic for me! I have a tool with tines set at a right angle and a handle long enough to provide leverage. In fact after this past summer, which has encouraged normal wimps to become superweeds, I have used a flat spade to unearth the monsters.

Larger tree seedlings require that treatment. After a rainy spell shorter ones such as hornbeam, hollies, pines, and juniper can be pulled out with a determined tug. Others I despair of and end up using loppers to chop through the roots, hoping they won't return in force next spring. With some persistent types(invasive privet comes to mind) painting the stump with herbicide may help.

Trumpet vine has been choking my garden for years, an example of 'plant in the wrong place' definition. It was here before I was and cannot be pulled out as the roots are based in China. Constant nipping as it emerges from the ground is a temporary fix, but I expect it will be around on Judgment Day.

Weeding is what you have to do after you have planted trees and shrubs and flowerbeds. If you have an expanse of land, devoid of any cherished plant, you could plow it to a great depth and start over. The weeds however will be back. As long as winds blow and birds fly seeds will nestle in and eventually sprout. Weeding may not be as beneficial as yoga or a trip to the gym, but for those of us who love to garden, weeding offers time to connect with the nature around us and even with our tangled, jangled selves.

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