

Selected Weed Identification

Donald F. Rodrigues, Environmental Horticulture Program, Ventura College

The term “weed” does not always indicate that a plant is undesirable. In many situations, it depends on where the plant is, what your attitude is about the plant and how the plant affects your management practices.

Many of the typical so-called weedy plants have earned their reputation because they have no economic importance; they can become invasive; they can have prolific reproductive life cycles; they can interfere with natural resources; and they may intrude into our desirable cultivated plants. Some are even unattractive!

But not all defined weedy plants are totally obnoxious. Many have culinary or medicinal value, some are appreciated for their beautiful flower displays and many species provide valuable wildlife or beneficial insect habitats. In the end, you must decide which is the weed !

Weeds, like all plants, have distinct habitats, lifecycles, morphological and physiological characteristics. Some live in or near water, others prefer diverse soil conditions. They originate locally or were introduced from foreign lands. All have specific life cycles and botanical characteristics that aid in determining their specific identification. Numerous publications, plant keys and experts are available to assist in identifying specific plants.

Today, we describe 15 selected plants of our region. These were chosen for their unique characteristics and commonality in our community.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum spp*), a member of the sunflower family, Asteraceae. A common perennial herb often associated with lawns. Yellow daisy like flowers with a circular ball windblown seed head. The branched taproot exudes a milky sap when broken. This native from Europe is very cosmopolitan, found throughout the United States. It thrives in moist soils, loves lawns and even survives mowing. The foliage is edible.

English Daisy (*Bellis perennis L.*). A perennial spreading plant of the Asteraceae family. The basal leaves create a low matted appearance. White flower heads with yellow centers appear on long stalks in the spring and summer. Introduced from Europe as a garden plant, it is now a common escapee typically found in lawns.

Annual Bluegrass (*Poa annua L.*). This annual grass often becomes perennial along the coast. Typically found in turfgrass plantings and planter beds. Emerges in the winter as a small clump with bright green leaf blades and an inflorescence that is pyramidal in shape with spreading branches. A fast grower that thrives with moisture. A major problem in golf course greens.

Nutsedge (*Cyperus esculentus L.*). Yellow Nutsedge and (*C.rotundus L*) Purple Nutsedge.

Often mistaken for a grass or called nutgrass, this plant belongs to the Cyperaceae family of plants which includes 600 species of sedges. An aggressive perennial that grows 6-30” in height. Identified by its triangular shiney waxy appearing leaves. Prefers moist soils.

A native from Europe, the plant produces brown nutlets on the roots which are a means of spread if cultivated. Nutsedge also reproduces by seed.

Spotted Spurge (*Euphorbia maculate L.*). A member of the Euphorbiaceae family of plants, this prostrate annual forms a dense mat in the summer time. Stems exude a milky latex sap when broken. Small pinkish flowers are formed in the leaf axils. A prolific seeder. Easily identified by its rounded leaf with purple spots. Some consider it edible.

Puncture Vine (*Tribulus terrestris L.*). A summer annual forming prostrate mats that reach 10-12’. Small foliage resembles a fern. One half inch yellow flowers with 5 petals are formed in the leaf axils. Mostly known for its spiny sharp fruit (seed) burs that can puncture through shoes

and bike tires. Sometimes called goat head. Originally introduced from Europe, it belongs to the Zygophyllaceae family of plants. Seed can remain dormant in the soil 4-5 years. Prefers dry, sandy soils.

Field Bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis L.*). Often called morning glory vine. This plant is a member of the Convolvulaceae family of plants and was introduced from Europe. A perennial with an extensive deep root system and prostrate growth. However, it will climb anything near by. The leaves are alternate and somewhat arrow shaped. The trumpet shaped flowers are white to pinkish, 1-2" in diameter. Flowers from June to October. Most often found in cultivated fields and gardens. Seeds viable up to 50 years in the soil.

Curly Dock (*Rumex crispus L.*). Native to Eurasia and a member of the Polygonaceae family of plants. A deep tap rooted perennial that grows 2-5' in height. The mostly basal curly leaves are 4-12" long with wavy margins. Small green flowers appear on spike like terminals in axillary clusters. Inflorescences and even entire plants turn reddish-brown at maturity in the fall. A common plant in wet areas..

Sowthistle (*Sonchus oleraceus L.*). Sowthistle was introduced from Europe and is found throughout the western United States growing in vacant lots, roadsides, cultivated fields and gardens. The plant is a member of the sunflower family, Asteraceae. Basal leaves are stalked and deeply lobed. The flower heads are numerous and pale yellow, ¼ to ¾ inch wide. The mature seed head containing seeds resembles a white powder puff ball. The seeds are flat and ribbed lengthwise with a tuft of fine hairs which allows wind-borne dissemination. The overall plant at maturity reaches a height of 1-4 feet.

Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare Miller*). Often called Anise or Sweet Anise, this perennial is native to Europe and belongs to the Apiaceae or carrot family of plants. It is often cultivated for its edible young leaves and the aromatic seeds are used to flavor foods. The plant matures in the fall with feathery fern like leaves on stalks 2-7' tall. Small yellow flowers are formed in clusters on the stalks. Seeds germinate in April-May. Found in vacant lots, roadsides and ditch banks. Fast growing and invasive.

Poison Hemlock (*Conium maculatum L.*). Also a member of the Apiaceae family of plants, all parts of this plant are poisonous. A biennial native to Europe, it can grow 6-8' in height. Erect stems are purple spotted. The shiny green lacy leaves resemble a fern. The foliage has a distinct parsnip odor. White flowers are produced on many umbrella shaped clusters. A very attractive plant! Tolerates poor soils and is generally found along streams and ditch banks.

Wild Mustard (*Brassica kaber (DC) Wheeler*). An edible plant in the Brassicaceae family. Generally a winter annual 1-3' tall. Erect stems with 2-8" long leaves that are 1-4" wide. The lower leaves are lobed with the upper leaves more toothed. Bright yellow flowers. Introduced from Europe, it is widespread and invasive especially along the foothills of the coast.

Datura (*Datura innoxia Miller*). A member of the nightshade, Solanaceae family of plants. Recognized by its large grayish-green foliage and large white to lavender trumpet flowers that can reach 6-10" across. The spring produced seed pod resembles a ball with spikes. The plant is hallucinogenic. Datura prefers dry soils and is generally found growing along roadsides.

Dodder (*Cuscuta spp*) A parasitic plant that lacks chlorophyll and is very apparent from its bright orange to yellow thread like stems. A member of the Convolvulaceae family of plants. Small seed germinate in the soil producing a thread like stalk that attaches to a plant. The root system disappears and the plant becomes parasitic on its host. Numerous white to pink small flowers from July to October. The seed are long lived.

Kikuyugrass (*Pennisetum clandestinum*). An east African introduction, this prostrate perennial is an aggressive and dense plant in the Poaceae family of plants. The major growing season is in

the summer with dormancy during the winter. It is quite invasive growing by rhizomes and stolons. Stems can reach ½' in diameter and 6-10' in length. The reproductive flowers are at the base of the plant with filamenous anthers appearing above the foliage from March to October. It produces prolific seeds that can be spread by mowing. Considered by many to be a weed, it is commonly managed as a lawn due to the inability to control its growth.

References:

Weeds of the West, Whitson, Burrill, Dewey, Cudney, Nelson, Lee and Parker, 1991
Growers Weed Identification Handbook, University of California