

A little work in new landscape now, controls a lot of weeds later

By David W. Marshall

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Weeds, weeds and more weeds.

Gardening would be pretty easy if it weren't for the weeds. The weeds are those plants that grow, regardless of what you do to them. They are the plants that grow where you don't want them.

Unfortunately, weeds can be a particularly pesky problem in the new landscape where the soil has usually been disturbed, bringing up dormant weed seeds. Or fill soil has been brought in, complete with, you guessed it, weed seeds.

In a new landscape, there's often lots of sunlight because there are often few trees. Weed seeds germinate under sunlight. So, the homeowner with a new landscape has to spend time, water and fertilizer making new plants grow, while fighting back the competition from the weeds.

Frustrated, many new landscape owners wish there were some magical herbicide that would stop the weeds. Indeed, there are a few herbicides that can be applied to the soil to inhibit weed seed germination. But, few, if any, are effective against a wide range of weeds. In fact, few herbicides are safe in the hands of most home gardeners, who can easily damage their landscape plants if rates are too high.

In general, there are no herbicides that can be sprayed over the top of landscape plants to kill only the weeds and not harm the landscape plants.

There are steps, though, that the new landscape owner can take to drastically reduce weed problems. Most of the steps involve the use of mulch, sometimes referred to as "the silent gardener" because it works even when you're not working.

Organic mulches, such as leaves or pine straw, are excellent because they reduce weed competition and conserve moisture in the soil. As they decompose, they return nutrients to the soil and improve its structure or workability.

Mulches should be thick enough, but not too thick. Thick enough to do the job means about 2 to 4 inches thick. Not too thick means not so thick as to impede oxygen and water movement into the soil. Don't exceed 4 inches in thickness, and always leave a 1- to 2-inch gap of air space right around the trunks of plants. Otherwise you risk rotting the stem.

Maintenance of a good layer of organic mulch will do wonders for holding down the weed population. When weeds sprout, they usually can be easily hand-pulled from a well-mulched bed.

There's an extra step you can take before applying your organic mulch that can reduce weed problems even more. It's the use of a landscape fabric or weed mat.

Landscape fabrics or weed mats are available at most garden centers in rolls of varying lengths and in varying qualities or thicknesses. The porous fabric, which allows water and oxygen penetration, is rolled out before a bed is planted. The planting holes are cut with an X through the fabric. Metal pins hold the fabric in place around the perimeter of the bed.

A little work in new landscape now

Finally, a mulch of pine straw or leaves is placed over the landscape fabric, making it invisible. Some weeds still come through, but the weed problem is drastically reduced.

Landscape fabric or weed mat will last for several years - until your landscape grows in, shading out most weeds. Weed problems generally drop dramatically after the first year or two a landscape is established anyway.

Don't be tempted to use black plastic instead of the landscape fabric. The plastic isn't porous and after it has been in about a year, it starts tearing and blowing in the wind, making a big mess.

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[Previous Page](#) [Home](#)