

Wild or Weedy?

When is a landscape wild looking, and when does wild become weedy? In many cases it's a personal decision, so I'll give you my definition. Wild means it looks like our surrounding foothills only a little more cared for and the plants grow larger because of the regular supply of water. Weedy for me means that the weeds listed below can be found in the landscape at some time of year. These should be removed, some quickly; others you can let bloom and then keep them from going to seed. And you need to understand that weeds come in all forms, from trees to groundcovers. Pictures for most weeds can be found on this website http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/weeds_intro.html Trees are the exception you'll have to Google them. A great book that's pretty much all pictures is Weeds of the West. I use it to attempt weed identification for plants I suspect are weeds.

Weeds of High Desert

Perennials

To control perennial weeds keep them from reseeding and remove them from the landscape. Many of these plants have runners, rhizomes, suckers, or spread by bunching. Remove them if you can. Trees may need an application of an herbicide to the cut trunk to kill them. Pulling weeds is always easiest after a rain when the soil is looser and it's easier to break the root free.

Tree of Heaven - this is the tree HeadsUp has been removing from the arroyos and open space. This tree grows in concrete, witness the tree from A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Very invasive plus it smells bad. Leaves look like a comb, but don't confuse it with sumac which has seed heads that look like fuzzy cones. Tree of Heaven has winged seeds like maples and ashes.

Siberian Elm - grows especially well in High Desert. Lovely small dark green leaves with serrated edges. Grows quickly, but the wood is weak so it can be dangerous. This tree also grows in concrete - even up through the pole for a stop sign. You have to admire a tree that wants to live that badly. But get rid of it and admire it from a distance.

Tamarisk or Salt Cedar - in addition to being on the invasive plants list this tree is also a high water user. Unfortunately it has a beautiful bloom and it did do a good job of erosion control for Albuquerque - so good you can't get near the river where salt cedar or Russian Olive is found. At least one landscape company in High Desert that planted this.

Russian Olive - while it has lovely colored leaves it also has thorns, messy fruit, weak wood, and is a high water user. It out-competes the plants around it and so has also been put on the invasive plants list.

Russian Sage – no one has declared this a noxious weed yet, but this plant likes to put out lots of suckers and it reseeds like crazy. I prune mine to about a foot high, reduce the water to them, and cut the tops off after flowering. An excess of these usually means the homeowner just let them go.

Silver Nightshade – a foot tall plant having lovely sage green leaves and star shaped purple flowers with yellow centers. It has tiny little hairs along the stem that contain an irritating toxin. You can pull this weed, but use serious gloves. The toxin can cause allergic reactions in some people. More than one or two in your landscape and I consider it weedy. Stop this one from spreading as it can quickly take over. The seeds are in a yellow fruit “berry”.

Thread grass – about a foot tall and waves beautifully in the wind. It’s a prolific re-seeder and pretty much grows wherever the seed lands. It has a lovely light sandy color in winter. I love mine, but then I comb the plant with a dog comb to keep the seed count down. Yes I’m obsessive, but if you don’t control the seeds, all your neighbors will have them - only some will enjoy and care for them. It was planted in High Desert by that same landscape company.

Annuals

The best control for annual weeds is to keep them from reseeding. That includes pulling, mowing, or weed whacking them before they release their seeds.

Cheat Grass – the ever present grass that’s left over from spring. It now controls High Desert medians and open space as well as many landscapes. It’s about 8” tall and the seed head droops. It’s a heavy re-seeder and I think we’ve lost the battle with this one. Easy to pull when it’s dry.

London Rocket and other Mustards - the green weed with the yellow flowers you see over the winter. It’s an alternate host for the beetle that causes curly top virus in tomatoes. So pull it or at least keep it from going to seed if you want good tomatoes.

Kochia – a small soft green fuzzy weed that can grow to 4-5’ tall. Easy to pull when it’s small. Another present from Russia. We had lots of kochia in our yard when we first moved in, but I don’t see it as much anymore.

Tumbleweed – It sounds romantic, the weed of the west, but let it grow more than ½” tall and it will bite you when you go to pull it! It’s a soft wiry weed when it’s small, but as the stems thicken they develop sharp spines. This weed is also known as Russian thistle.

Bindweed – lovely little vine with spade shaped leaves and peppermint striped morning glory type blooms. This is the toughest weed of all to get rid of because the roots go to China. Multiple applications of an herbicide may be the only way. There is a bindweed mite that also works, slowly. This weed can cover your landscape in no time so don’t let it take hold.

Black medic – a low weed that looks like clover. It grows quickly and reseeds because landscapes where I’ve seen black medic in the spring have it again the next year. When I see this weed I consider the landscape to be “weedy”.

Fleabane – actually a biennial that is very low and soft, with cute little white/pink daisy-like flowers. I loved them and let them go for a year or two. I started pulling them once I realized they were taking over. Easy to identify by the closed blooms.

Hare barley grass – this grass has also been prevalent this year. The dried seed head blows everywhere and the seeds have multiple awns that break apart so you get hundreds of new plants. Gather the seed heads from under shrubs and other plants. Pull the mother plant if you can find it. I've been pulling my plants all season, but the seed heads keep blowing in from somewhere else.

Spurge – grows flat on the ground with multiple green leaves often with a stripe down the middle. They give off a milky sap when pulled. Get the root or they'll be back. The good news is that they're easy to pull.

There are a few other annuals, but I haven't seen them a lot in High Desert yet such as pigweed, crabgrass, sandbur, Johnson grass, and nutsedge. I'd mention dandelions, but I think everyone is familiar with them from our childhoods. I didn't mention Scottish thistle with the gorgeous purple bloom because the birds love them and the plants are not really invasive.

Other Weedy Aspects

I consider landscapes with weeds or plants that have re-seeded and haven't been pulled to be weedy. If you have gravel, making the gravel deeper (max. 4") should reduce the reseeding. Plants that are overgrown and haven't been cut back (remember cut at a joint) or that hang over the sidewalk, driveway, or street; plants that are dangerous to others e.g. visibility near a stop sign; plants that are causing walls to fail.

Many High Desert landscapes have plants that have reached their mature size. Unfortunately the landscaper designed the landscape so it would be good on day one and some plants may need to be removed because now they're just too close together. Some people think that landscape fabric keeps weeds from reseeding, but that's not true. It keeps seeds that are under the fabric from getting light and germinating. Seeds that blow in on top and that have even a little soil will germinate just fine. In fact gravel is a wonderful growing medium for lots of desert plants!

Conclusion

The important concept to gain from this article is to learn to recognize which plants are weeds and be a good neighbor by controlling your weeds. Not only is gardening good exercise, but you don't have to pay to do it yourself, you can do almost any time, and it's a great stress reducer.