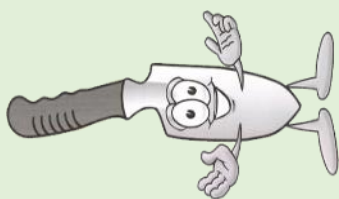


# Trowel Talk!

August, 2017



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- [newsletter@mgottawa.ca](mailto:newsletter@mgottawa.ca)

## In praise of weeds

There are no bad plants, just unsuitable locations. The simple definition of a weed is, any plant growing where you don't want it. The inverse is also true: if you like that plant growing where it is – it's not a weed.

Because I garden for wildlife, I often acquire plants that others might consider weeds. Some are welcome volunteers and some are paid help.

Volunteers that appear uninvited include native and introduced wildflowers. Two of these – blue weed (*Echium vulgare*) and black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia hirta*) – are biennials, so can easily be eliminated in their first year, long before they flower and set seed.

Blue weed was introduced from Eurasia and is often seen growing along roadsides. I value its long-lasting deep blue flower spikes, which start in mid-summer and continue until fall. Butterflies and pollinators of all kinds find them irresistible. They are also good in bouquets, the flowers' delicacy belied by how long they last. But wear gloves to pick them, because blue weed has very prickly stems and hairy leaves.

Black-eyed Susans are native to eastern North America and grow wild along the banks of the Ottawa River. Years ago, some of their seeds migrated into my garden and I've had them ever since. Their cheerful deep yellow daisy-like flowers add long-lasting colour from late summer until the snow flies. I leave them standing all winter to add interest to the garden and to attract goldfinches and house finches which feast on the seed heads from late winter until early spring.



Photo: Rebecca Last

A similar native perennial, purple coneflower seen above (*Echinacea purpurea*) also has good food value for small migratory birds and self-seeds prolifically. In parts of my garden it has achieved weed status.

Another migrant from the river's edge is the native common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*). I was happy to welcome it as an important food plant for monarch butterfly larvae. I was surprised to discover that the milkweed blooms, although not spectacular-looking, have a delightful sweet fragrance. They attract pollinators, including the adult monarchs, and hummingbirds. Apparently, they are also nice as dried flowers. Milkweed is perennial and spreads by both rhizomes and seeds dispersed on the wind by silky filaments. Rigorous discipline may be needed to keep it under control in some gardens, but it struggles in my poor-quality sandy soil.

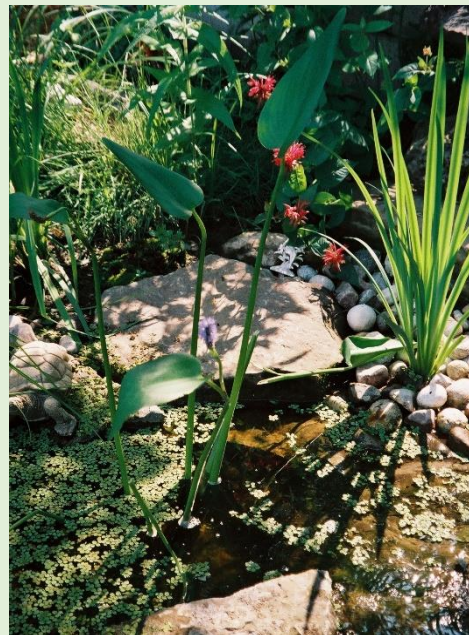


Photo: Rebecca Last

Among my "paid help" are cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) and pickerel weed seen above (*Pontedaria cordata*). Both plants enjoy the moist environment around my pond. Cardinal flower's lovely spikes of scarlet flowers brighten the bog garden in mid- to late-summer and attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Pickerel weed lives right in the pond, where it provides shelter and shade for the goldfish. The blue flower spikes appearing in late summer add colour and attract pollinators. In the wild, water fowl eat the seeds.

So, before you pull another weed, stop and think about its place in the ecosystem of your garden. It might be some creature's home or dinner. If you decide it is not a weed, you could save yourself some unnecessary work.

Rebecca Last  
Master Gardener



## Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton

### Where to find us for free gardening advice!

#### ONGOING:

**Telephone Help Line:** 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1–3 pm (all year)

**E-mail Help Line:** [mgoc\\_helpline@yahoo.ca](mailto:mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca)

- monitored daily

- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

#### CLINICS:

**Cumberland Market:** Sept. 9, 9am-1pm

**North Gower Farmers Market:** Sept. 16, 8:30am-1pm

**Main St. Market:** August 26, Sept. 9 & 23, 10am-2pm

**Ottawa Farmers Market:** (Lansdowne) Sundays, June 18 to Sept. 24, 9am-1pm

**Riverside South Market:** (Riverview Park & Ride) Sunday, Aug. 27, 10am-1pm

#### SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

**Preserving the harvest** – September 5 – 7:30 pm

Rebecca Last, Master Gardener

Old MarchTown Hall, 821 March Road, Kanata

Kanata March Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$5)

**You're not done yet ... how to put your gardens to bed** – September 6 – 7:15 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Portland Community Hall, 24 Water Street, Portland

Hosted by the Rideau Lakes Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$5)

**Little or no maintenance for the busy gardener** – September 12 – 7:00 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

The RCAFA Wing 424, 240 Water Street West, Cornwall

Hosted by the Cornwall Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$5)

**Gardening for continuous joy** – September 13 – 7:00 pm

Judith Cox, Master Gardener

1448 Meadow Drive, Greely

Hosted by Greely Gardeners Group (Guest fee: \$3)

**Putting your garden to rest** – September 14 – 6:00 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

900 Morrison Drive, Ottawa

Hosted by Lee Valley ([link to registration & fees](#))

**Rip out or rejuvenate** – September 19 – 7:30 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Pretty Street Community Centre, 2 Pretty Street, Stittsville

Hosted by the Stittsville Goulbourne Horticultural Society (Guest fee: N/A)

**Bulbs for year-round enjoyment** – October 3 – 7:30 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Old March Town Hall, 821 March Road, Kanata

Kanata March Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$5)

**Going grassless – Honey I shrunk the lawn** – Thursday October 19 – 7:30 pm

Julianne Labreche, Master Gardener

City View United Church, 6 Epworth Avenue, Nepean

Hosted by the Nepean Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$4)



For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.ca>



### August TO DO List

- Collect seed for next year. Snip the seed head off into a paper bag to let it finish drying out.
- Keep track of plants that you want to move or divide this fall. Keep notes and make a 'to do' item in your calendar for late September.
- Keep controlling pests, diseases and weeds. Clean-up of infected plants is also important. Doing these chores now may reduce next year's garden problems.
- If you have excess produce share it with a food bank or soup kitchen.
- Consider bringing a bouquet of fresh flowers from your garden to a retirement residence or nursing home for one of their common areas.
- If you have gardening or plant ID questions, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

### Tip of the Month

The benefits of adding organic matter (such as compost, shredded leaves or manure) to garden soil have been discussed in past newsletters. An additional advantage that comes to mind at this time of year is that it makes harvest much easier.

If your soil is rich with organic matter, you should be able to harvest a potato by reaching into the hilled soil, feeling around and pulling out a potato without disturbing the plant. If that doesn't work you can dig out the plant, harvest the bigger potatoes and replant the potato plant so that the tiny potatoes continue to grow.

Root crops like carrots, beets, parsnips and turnips should pull out easily if your soil is loose and rich with humus.

Weeds are also easier to pull when the soil has a high organic matter content.