

To Weed or Not to Weed?

By Susan Camp

The last time we had a weed-free lawn was over twenty years ago, when we lived in York County. In fact, that was the last time we had a lawn. In Gloucester, we have a field, which is a freeing experience, except for the mowing. No seeding, watering, fertilizing with toxic chemicals, no pesticides and herbicides, and no lying awake at night worrying about a letter of reprimand from the homeowners' association.

There are other benefits, as well. In the spring, pretty green things with delicate, pastel blossoms start to pop up in our field. Some people call them weeds, but I call them wildflowers. Early wildflowers include purple dead nettle (*Lamium purpureum*) and henbit (*Lamium amplexicaule*). The golden buttercups (*Ranunculus repens*) are lovely in low-lying, damp areas and take me back to childhood. Even the common dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) and English plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) are attractive in the spring and early summer. My favorites are the dainty wild violets (*Viola odorata*) that I use to make a delicious jelly to serve with cheese and crackers.

These plants are attractive because they stay in the field. Weeds in the flowerbeds are a different story. Back in York County, we had weedless flowerbeds. In Gloucester, we have an invasion by two natives that people sometimes plant in their gardens. I am going to suggest that you stay far away from these two plants, but if you decide to use them, be forewarned that you will work many hours to keep them under control.

We have extensive beds of daylilies that we inherited from the original owners. The daylilies thrive with water, mulch, and occasional attention. So does the trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*). *C. radicans* is a southeastern United States native, hardy from Zones 4 to 10 and is considered an invasive weed, according to <http://plants.usda.gov>. It is a woody vine with deep green leaves, and a tenacious habit. The multi-stemmed vine can grow up to 40 feet in length. It will attach to any available surface and is almost impossible to remove or destroy. The summer flowers are the brilliant orange-red trumpets you may have seen on vines covering fences and electrical poles. The flowers are a significant source of nectar for hummingbirds. You can buy trumpet vine at nurseries and garden centers, but I would not recommend doing so unless you are developing a wildlife habitat. If you decide to plant one, provide it with a sturdy post or arbor or grow it in a large container. It is a beautiful vine, but extremely invasive. One source noted that trumpet vine requires "ruthless pruning."

The second plant invading our daylily beds is mistflower (*Eupatorium coelestinum* or *Conoclinium coelestinum*), also called hardy ageratum. Mistflower is a lovely, hardy perennial, native to the southeastern and central United States, according to www.wildflower.org. It grows up to 36 inches tall with light green leaves and reddish-brown stems. The flowers are tiny puffballs in shades of blue, violet, or pink, with a sweet, baby powder fragrance. Butterflies and bees love mistflower in late summer. The problem is that once they show up, they won't leave. I

don't know where they came from. We didn't plant them, but they appeared about ten years ago, and we are still fighting them. A friend thought the mistflowers were enchanting and asked me for some plants one summer, but I refused. I value our friendship too much.

We could get rid of these beautiful but unwelcome native plants with potent herbicides, but several years ago, we decided to avoid using toxic chemicals on our property, whenever possible. Sometimes it seems like a hard choice, but we prefer to remove unwanted plants by hand, a thankless task. It might be easier to dig up the daylilies and let the mistflower and trumpet vine take over.

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