

# The Tool Shed



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## Weeding Tools

The crisp autumn air is just around the corner and many of us are looking forward to the cool weather...along with the demise of WEEDS! Gardeners are always looking for ways to rid their gardens and lawns of weeds, from mulch to herbicides and from hoes to flame throwers. Weeds are hardy, prolific, and usually start and grow faster than cultivated seeds. Curly dock, for example, a very common weed in Rhode Island, can produce 40,000 seeds from one plant and these can remain viable for 70 years. This gives a whole new meaning to the old saying "Seeds one year, weeds for seven."

All weeds propagate by seeds, and some, specifically perennial weeds, can spread by means of roots or rhizomes. Every time you till the ground you bring more seeds to the soil surface. Once in this environment the warmth and light encourage germination and hence the weed's life cycle continues. Armed with this knowledge of weed propagation, you can plan an assault on weeds that includes both prevention and removal before they go to seed.

Pulling weeds before they produce seeds is a great way to prevent problems. Cutting some weeds off just below the soil surface can prevent them from growing back. With this method make sure you are using a gentle swipe and not a forceful chop. You want to cut off the main stem of the plant, not drag the lower soil layer, along with buried seeds, up to the surface. However, many perennial weeds, such as dandelion, thistle, or curly dock, usually have long taproots or multiple runners that require complete or frequent removal to effectively disarm them.

Many gardeners have an arsenal of weed removing weapons that are used to scrape, dig, or somehow penetrate the weeds' environment. Like all other tools weeding tools have specific uses, some even come with instructions. I think if it is not obvious how the weeder works, it probably won't work.

Most weeding tools are short handled and are designed to be used while the gardener is on their knees or sitting right in the garden. This allows better control of the weeding process and allows one to switch instruments depending on what type of weed you come across. Long-handled weeders are effective when used gently and are great when sitting and kneeling are not an option.

**The first type of weeder, the claw or cultivator**, is used primarily to eliminate large patches of sprawling weeds like spurge, cleavers, annual bluegrass, or nepeta. The tines of these tools grab the spreading branches of the plant and save time for the gardener in trying to find where the roots have taken hold. They are also used to break up the soil surface. However, caution should be used not to dig too deeply to avoid bringing weed seeds to the surface.

**The second type of weeder is the weed slicer.** This category of tool is the most popular and the most diverse in design of the weeding tools. These weeders cut the weeds off at the soil surface thereby eliminating the weed's ability to feed its roots. These tools, when used correctly, also loosen the surface of the soil allowing for better water and nutrient absorption. Unlike the claw, this type of weeder does not disrupt the soil enough to bring waiting weed seeds to the surface. Some examples of slicing weeders are:

- **Cape Cod Weeder or Yankee Weeder** – An excellent handheld weed slicer for right-handed weeders. The shape of a Cape Cod weeder is like a finger bent at the first and second joints, with the inner edge sharpened.
- **Circle or Henningsen Hoe** – This newest weeder on the market allows for weeding in the tight spaces of flower or vegetable gardens. This circular tool has a limited sharpened area that prevents damage to surrounding plants when weeding. It is also available in the long handle style.
- **Angle Weeder** – A stainless steel tool, designed for left and right handed persons. It allows for scratching the weed off at the surface as well as digging deep for the taprooted dandelion.
- **Nejiri Weeder** – This Japanese weeder is very sharp on one side and easily slices through weeds while loosening the soil surface. It allows for good control of weeding because it only works using a pull action.
- **Crack Weeder** – This is used primarily to cut weeds out of cracks on patios or driveways or between bricks. Its primary design is one single blade with a hook at the end to get under the roots of plants in tight spaces.

**Oscillating Hoe** – Also known as the stirrup or action hoe, the blade of this hoe moves approximately one-half inch back and forth as the hoe is pushed or pulled. This tool has a double-edged blade that cuts in both directions. It is primarily a long handled tool.

**The third type of weeder** is designed to penetrate the soil in a piercing action to remove deeply entrenched roots. Perennial weeds often require a tool that will completely dig up the deep taproot or remove the established root system. The primary tool for this purpose is the **fishtail** or **dandelion weeder**. It is also called an asparagus knife. The business end of this weeder is shaped in a sharp inverse V to catch a taproot deep and ease it out of the ground. Another popular tool for this purpose is the farmer's weeder or 'hori-hori knife'. This weeder is shaped like a dull 6-inch knife with a slightly dished end and it is excellent for digging out deep taproots.

Arming yourself with information is the first step in the battle of the weeds. Arming yourself with the right tool for the job is the next step. The joy of seeing your garden or yard after weeding is rewarding and satisfying. Happy weeding!