

Controlling Weeds, Organically.

by Michael Bosco, Founder of Soils Alive, LLC

You may already know that weeds are a challenge to manage as a part of an organic program. As with many of our clients, I also strive to create the perfect lawn of my own – one that is visually appealing and weed-free. However, nature calls for and thrives through biodiversity. And biodiversity, although a naturally beneficial state, works against a green lawn – a monoculture. So how does the organically-minded grower deal with weeds? The answer begins with a better understanding of the role of weeds.

How Weeds Help

What is a weed, really? A weed is just a plant out of place. And although many of us see weeds as detrimental to a beautiful lawn, weeds do serve a natural purpose.

The natural role of weeds is to build soil fertility. How? Every weed has a specific soil type as well as mineral deficiency or excess under which it thrives. In this way each weed draws out nutrients from the soil that many other plants cannot as easily access. This may be through a deeper taproot, more fibrous root system or some symbiotic relationship with soil microorganisms.

Weeds can also be a great indicator to help identify specific soil problems. If there are one or two weeds that seem to proliferate in an area of a lawn, we may take that as a sign of compaction, deficiencies or some other soil related problem that needs to be addressed. For example, a lawn that has a bad problem with dandelions often means calcium is unavailable, or that the soil is not biologically active. This is not uncommon with North Texas soil, which is normally high in calcium but sometimes biologically inactive. Therefore the answer is not to add more calcium but to add compost or compost tea. By introducing life back into the dirt we create a living breathing soil that allows nutrients to be more available.

Reconciling Nature With A Weed-free Lawn

So now that you know more about the role of weeds, here is some good news about how to maintain a healthier lawn with fewer weeds.

1. You Can Achieve A Green Lawn With Fewer Weeds, Naturally.

It is often taught that a healthy lawn will have fewer weeds. This is a true statement, but does not necessarily mean a 100% weed free lawn. Many times we start off at Soils Alive with a lawn that might be 50% weeds and within a year the lawn is much healthier and we reduce the weeds down to 10%. Although a dramatic reduction in the number of weeds, organic treatment alone is not enough to achieve the uniformity of a desired monoculture. Therefore it is necessary to constantly treat or pull new weeds as they emerge.

2. Different Lawn Grasses Have Vastly Different Weed Suppression.

St. Augustine: I have found St. Augustine to be the best weed suppressing lawn grass, hands down. St. Augustine has a wide leaf blade that does a better job of out-competing most weeds.

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Bermuda: Bermuda, on the other hand, even when thick and dense just doesn't compete well enough to keep weeds out. Once crab grass gets started in Bermuda it out-competes Bermuda the same way St. Augustine pushes out Bermuda. I believe it goes back to the wider leaf blade shading out the competition.

Zoysia: when allowed to grow taller and not mowed as often, Zoysia creates a very thick mat that keeps weeds out once established from solid sod. If Zoysia becomes stressed or gets damaged it does not grow fast enough to fill in, and those areas can easily become weedy.

Other Mixtures: over-seeding Bermuda with rye grass is a good way of controlling winter weeds. If winter weeds do germinate in winter rye grass the competition and mowing does not allow them to become a major problem. One "weed" that I hear a lot of complaints about is fescue. Many times fescue is in retail over-seed mixtures or fescue is used instead of ryegrass by unsuspecting homeowners. Most of it will die but some will make it through the summer, making the lawn appear weedy the following spring. There is no known organic solution to fescue in a non-fescue lawn other than a shovel.

Remember, weeds do serve a purpose. And we as organic gardeners need accept them as one of Mother Nature's tools. Understanding and accepting the natural role of weeds can help all of us make more informed decisions about how to deal with them in creating a more beautiful and natural lawn and landscape.

Soils Alive was established in 1997 to provide organic solutions and natural fertilization programs that support healthy, safe, sustainable landscapes. With our proven methods in organic care, we guarantee desired results.

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