Organic Weed Control: What Works, What Doesn’t

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In our comprehensive Worst Garden Weeds Survey, gardeners rated several mulch types and organic herbicides based on their effectiveness in controlling weeds. Out of those who’d tried each type, here’s how the methods ranked, with percentage of respondents.

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| **Top-Rated Mulch Types**  1. Paper or newspaper (80 percent) 2. Black plastic (76 percent) 3. Straw or hay (69 percent) 4. Shredded wood or bark (65 percent) 5. Grass clippings (63 percent) 6. Living mulch (45 percent) 7. Clear plastic (21 percent) | **Top-Rated Organic Herbicides**  1. Vinegar (72 percent) 2. Herbicidal soap (68 percent) 3. Neem oil (57 percent) 4. BurnOut Weed & Grass Killer (42 percent) 5. Weed Prevention Plus (29 percent) 6. Weed Pharm Organic Weed Killer (23 percent) 7. Cinnamon bark crab grass killer (17 percent) |

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**Seize the Sun.** More gardeners reported success with mulches than with herbicides. As you evaluate your mulch options, keep in mind that clear plastic — the lowest-ranking mulch type — will only work to kill weeds if it’s used in summer and pulled tightly over soil, creating a hot environment weeds can’t tolerate. This method of capturing radiant heat from the sun under clear plastic is often called solarization. To solarize a bed, water areas of bare soil, and then cover the areas with clear plastic. Dig a trench and bury the edges of tightly pulled plastic in the trench so the heat will build up, and keep the plastic cover on the garden bed for three to six weeks.

**Mulches Are Strong Medicine.** Several gardeners said the most successful mulch strategy was to use newspapers and/or cardboard under a thick layer of organic mulch, such as grass clippings, shredded leaves, straw, hay or a combination (wet your newspapers so they don’t fly around). The tips most often cited were to do a couple of good hand weeding sessions early in the growing season before laying down mulch, and to keep reapplying organic mulches as they decompose throughout the season. Grass clippings will block weed growth better than the same thickness of hay or straw, but will usually not last as long. Grass also releases more beneficial nitrogen than hay, straw or leaves. Start your mulching regimen early, before weeds get a foothold, and don’t be shy about applying a lot — if you can, mulch 6 to 8 inches deep with hay, straw or leaves, or 2 to 3 inches deep with grass clippings. Organic mulches are a quadruple win because they suppress weeds, build fertility, retain moisture and are often free. Simply gather grass clippings and leaves from your property, or get them from friends or neighbors who don’t use lawn herbicides.

Many respondents commented that black plastic mulch is effective because it blocks light from weeds, but it can leave a mess of fragments in your garden when it eventually deteriorates. Others noted usefulness of landscape fabric beneath a layer of straw to keep weeds out of paths.

**Organic Herbicides.** Almost all of the gardeners who commented on organic herbicides said the ones that work only offer a temporary fix. Many said store-bought options aren’t worth the money. Many gardeners considered vinegar an effective herbicide option if applied directly to weeds on a sunny day. *If you’re cautious about protecting the soil food web in your garden, note that vinegar can do minor harm to soil microorganisms.*