

The Benefits of Weeds

The true definition of a weed is a plant that is growing where it is not supposed to be growing. As we walk through parks, gardens and in and around streets, we encounter weeds of all shapes, sizes and color. For example, did you know that a tree could be a weed? If a bird or a squirrel plants a tree seed (an acorn) in your flowerbed and it grows in your bed, it's essentially a weed. While most people consider a weed to be a nuisance, some of the most common garden weeds are actually beneficial herbs.

So, what are the benefits of weeds? Some lawn and garden weeds actually bring nutrients and water up from deep within the soil and down from the air, and subsequently make them available to microbes and plants. Some weeds break up hardpans and compaction and control erosion and, if a weed is a legume, it provides nitrogen to the soil. Weeds increase the organic matter content of the soil as they continually grow and die. That's one reason to let them cycle through the lawn.

Let's take a closer look at the common weeds we see in the fall through spring throughout the state of Oklahoma. The dandelion, with its iron-rich toothed leaves is a huge attraction to honeybees. This weed is not only edible but the roots are deep and, as they decay, they provide incredible tunnels for earthworms who work to help break down organic matter and open up air and water sources. Although this entire plant can be used for food and medicine, many people are intolerant of this beautiful herb.

Chickweed and henbit look absolutely stunning, en masse. For instance, they are beautiful on a hillside or in a pasture setting. However, chickweed gathers up potassium and phosphorus as it enriches the soil and is a great source of food for pollinators every spring. As we observe small clumps of it in our garden, we may be turned off, but don't fret. Once the weather starts to warm up, chickweed will do its job of releasing nutrients back into the soil.

If there's one thing that box turtles enjoy, it's the foliage from henbit. The name itself sounds teeny, weeny, and delicate. Henbit is in the mint family and is awesome as a salad green. Chickens and hummingbirds adore this plant and, just like chickweed, it provides a great source of nectar and pollen for bumblebees and honeybees. Once in fully bloom, it attracts pollinators.

Papalo is also an attractive weed that loves our climate which grows 4-6 feet tall. It smells just like cilantro. It's also referred to as the butterfly leaf. In our neck of the woods, it's considered an annual that dies back with the first frost. Papalo repels the bad bugs like beetles and squash bugs with its strong aroma.

There are numerous other weeds that grow happily in our zone. Actually, some of the most common lawn and garden weeds have medicinal properties and many of them produce lovely flowers as well.

So, before you pluck that weed from the garden, give it another good look. You may be surprised to learn that your so-called weed requires a space in the herb garden.