Battling weeds, naturally

By Kathleen Barnes
Transylvania Extension Master Gardener

It’s that time of year when your perfectly laid out and meticulously groomed garden grows into a weed patch overnight. Your best-laid plans go for naught.

Woe to the gardener who plans a two-week vacation at this time of the year. In fact, I’ve found that there is a great return in inviting my two young granddaughters to visit us at this time of year so they can help with weeding, if they can differentiate between weeds and keepers.

Statistically, this is the time of year when many gardeners simply throw in the towel. Don’t be a quitter. There is hope. You can not only rein in the invasion of the jungle. You can prevent it from becoming overwhelming with a few simple steps.

What is a weed? I’ve always been told it is a plant out of place. And oftentimes, out of place means that those buttercups, pretty in the pasture, are robbing your veggies of nutrients and water, so they have to go.

My answer to the weed problem is mulch, mulch, mulch. We are fortunate enough to have loads of mulch from the cleanup of the 2010 ice storm damage and I have been using that liberally on paths and even in the ornamental beds. I don’t use it on my vegetable beds because it doesn’t decompose quickly and there may be toxic branches ingredients in there. Black walnut is particularly poisonous to most plants, so be sure your mulch doesn’t contain any.

Old newspapers and brown paper bags make excellent mulch for veggie gardens and everywhere. Paper keeps the areas around plants and in paths clear, is water permeable and decomposes to become part of your soil amendments by time you’re ready to plant next year’s garden. Be sure not to use any of the slick advertising sections, since they may contain toxic inks.

I’ve even used scraps of old carpet in my garden paths. Those synthetic carpets don’t look terribly appealing, but they are impervious to weeds and will stay undiminished for years. Best of all they can be laid right down on the tops of foot-tall weeds and things look beautiful almost instantly.

In theory, it sounds like spoiled hay or straw would be an excellent mulch. Not so. I know because that was my theory one sad year. No hay or straw is ever so spoiled that there are no seeds—and those seeds grow into—guess what?—grass—a weed if found in your
garden. Old hay is fine for covering re-seeded lawns.

Shredded leaves are my favorite mulch for several reasons, primarily that they contain no seeds. They are available in abundance in the fall and they decompose quickly, adding nutrients to your soil. They do tend to be acidic, so be sure to test your soil and add aklalinizers, primarily lime, if things get too hot.

While most of these mulching and weed control methods may best be employed in the preventive mode, you can control weeds with mulch after the fact, even now when you’re battling the jungle.

More times than I care to admit, I have string trimmed my overgrown garden paths and then applied a thick layer of mulch that keeps things under control for the next few months.

In a pinch, invite your kids and grandkids, even the neighbor’s kids to help beat back the jungle, then mulch, mulch, mulch!

**Garden Box for late June:**

- Prune climbing roses after they bloom.
- Stake dahlias and climbing clematis. Prune clematis after it blooms.
- Encircle lilacs with a complete fertilizer. Rake it in and water thoroughly.
- Continue fungicide/insecticide sprays on fruit trees and grape vines.
- Fertilize (sidedress) vegetables six weeks after planting.
- Spray tomatoes weekly with a fungicide to control blight.

*Do you have a question for the Transylvania Extension Master Gardeners or a subject you’d like to see addressed in this column? E-mail us at manymoons@citcom.net or have your garden questions answered at our telephone clinic from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Wednesdays, March through October. Call 884-3239 or walk-in during those hours at the Community Services Building, 98 E. Morgan St. The Transylvania Extension Master Gardener program is sponsored by the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service: www.transylvania.ces.ncsu.edu.*