

Weeding

by Brad Lancaster and the Dunbar/Spring Neighborhood Foresters

Lesson One

A big lesson learned is you've got to eliminate [invasive plants](#) from a site BEFORE you plant rain and other vegetation. When we've skipped this step due to excuses of not having the time or money to remove the weeds, we've always been sorry, because the weeds rebound with a vengeance and then we must spend much more time and money trying to get rid of them.

But when we DO eliminate the invasive plants from a site before we plant rain and other vegetation things work great!

Lesson Two

Don't plant rain and vegetation until you've got a committed steward or stewards that have signed a [maintenance/stewarding agreement](#) committing to keep the area weed free.

When our neighborhood got a big grant to put in passive water harvesting and plantings in the public rights of ways, the installations were spread evenly throughout the neighborhood, but with no consideration of whether or not there was someone on that block committing to care for it. The uncared-for installations became weed jungles.

The Dunbar/Spring Neighborhood Foresters have since been working to train up and assist stewards willing to take care of these areas.

Weeding

The non-toxic way

Ideally, we just hand pull weeds. This is non-toxic and easy to do, especially when the ground is moist after a rain.

With the rains, native wildflowers and weeds both come up. So we have Work & Learn weeding and plant identification parties where we show folks how to tell the difference between a wildflower seedling and a weed seedling.



Removing invasive London Rocket mustard seedlings, while leaving native wildflower seedlings (which include bladderpod, lupine, and more)



Invasive London rocket mustard seedlings removed, and native wildflower seedlings including bladder pod and lupine remain.

If you pull the weeds and leave the wildflowers you get a great wildflower show that produces lots of wildflower seed for the next years, and there will be fewer weeds the next year as there are now fewer weed seed in the area.

Addressing a weed jungle

When reclaiming a previously uncared for area that is now a jungle of invasive weeds we typically begin with pruning trees and shrubs if needed to regain access, litter pick up, and removal of the easy weeds like tumbleweed or buffleggrass —easily dug up with a pointed shovel—*especially if it is the rainy season and the soil is moist.*



BEFORE. Uncared for water-harvesting, traffic-calming chicane that has become a jungle of invasive plants. The invasive trees are larger than the desired native trees. Photo credit: Brad Lancaster



AFTER removing invasive trees, shrubs, and weeds. The remaining natives can now thrive. Photo credit: Brad Lancaster.

But Bermuda grass is different. It is difficult because it resprouts from its extensive root system. So for Bermuda grass, after removing all the other invasives, we weed wack the Bermuda grass to the ground, rake it all up, and throw it in the trash.

But make sure you do NOT weed wack the plants you do want like native grasses. We flag them and hand pull the Bermuda grass directly around them before any weed wacking.



Hand pulling invasive Bermuda grass after flagging native grasses we want to keep. This greatly reduces the chance that volunteers will accidentally take out the wrong plant. Photo credit: Brad Lancaster

After weed wacking we wait for rain.

Just as the Bermuda grass reemerges after a good rain, and its new green growth is 2 inches or less in height we spray it with an herbicide following the application directions EXACTLY.

A non-toxic alternative would be to dig up any reemerging Bermuda grass the moment it reemerges, but not all stewards are that present and careful.

If using herbicides, it is essential to do it in a way that minimizes its use and the harmful spread of its toxins—it kills more life than weeds. This is why we weed wacked and raked up the grass before application of herbicide—so we could be very strategic and only get it on what we are trying to kill when it is most likely to be killed.



*BEFORE weeding an uncared-for water-harvesting, traffic-calming chicane.
Photo credit: Brad Lancaster*



*AFTER removing invasive plants, and seeding native wildflower and restoration
plant seed mixes Photo credit: Brad Lancaster*



AFTER the rains, we again weed out the invasive plants and leave the desired native plants. Photo credit: Brad Lancaster



AFTER weeding out the invasive plants, the native plants flower and go to seed to better outcompete the invasive weeds next year. Photo credit: Brad Lancaster

Working with a contractor for weeding

Weeding is not as fun as planting, so if there is too much weeding to tackle with volunteers, we'll bring in a contractor.

Though I am constantly shocked by how many landscape contractors and their staff do not have good plant identification skills and very often cannot tell the difference between an invasive plant and a desired native plant.

So, if you bring in a contractor walk them around to the various sites and ask them to identify all the plants. If they can't, then get someone else, and make sure any staff they bring to the site pass the same test.

We've only used contractors for herbicide application, so we don't expose our volunteers to it.

And we only bring in contractors one or two times to set the weeds back. After that, neighborhood stewards can do the rest.

Note that the City will send in crews to herbicide areas, but we have found this to be diastorous as the crews that have come to our neighborhood have no plant identification skills and they spray everything—including the native plants we want to keep.



Note the green spots where untrained, city-hired crews sprayed herbicide (with green dye) on native cactus, shrubs, and wildflowers we are trying to grow. Photo credit: Brad Lancaster.

So anytime such a crew comes to our neighborhood, we immediately approach them, and ask what work they are planning to do. If they are going to spray herbicide we ask them who sent them, we get their contact info, then we politely ask them to leave after explaining past problems with such herbicide application. Then we call the folks that sent them along with Mayor and Council to put a stop to the practice.

Now stepping back, if the herbicide crews were properly trained in plant identification and herbicide application we could coordinate with, and supervise them. But so far, we have not succeeded in getting the authorizing city department or staff to agree to this. We keep trying. But in the meantime, we've at least greatly reduced the crews killing desired plants in the neighborhood. And we've dramatically reduced weed growth in the neighborhood thanks to neighborhood stewards.



Native wildflowers coming back after we removed the weeds and broadcast the wildflower seed.