Common Midwest Garden Weeds

For more information, we recommend checking out: Eating on the Wild Side by Jo Robinson

This material was adapted from a guide created by the Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance
www.garfieldconservatory.org
This guide highlights 16 of the most common weeds found in gardens across the Midwest. While many weeds are a nuisance or invasive, some weeds might actually provide a benefit to your garden or the animals that visit your garden! Use the key below to learn more about each plant.

- Soil Builder
- Pollinator
- Invasive
- Edible
**Lamb’s Quarters**

Other Common Names: Goosefoot, Pigweed, Wild Spinach  
Scientific Name: *Chenopodium album*  
Family: Goosefoot Family  
Characteristics: Grows 1-4 feet high; leaves are grayish-green on top with dusty white undersides, shaped something like a goose’s foot; small, inconspicuous green flowers bloom mid to late summer.  
A Few Words About This Weed: Although lamb’s quarters is a biological weed and can be a serious nuisance, it has several beneficial qualities. Lamb’s quarters prefers moist, fertile soil, so if you have robust specimens of this plant growing in your garden, chances are good your soil is thriving. If you enjoy leafy greens like kale and spinach, you might enjoy the taste of the young leaves and stems of this plant, steamed or raw in a salad. Lamb’s quarters is rich in Vitamins A and C, iron and calcium, as well as many other nutrients.

**Chicory**

Other Common Names: Succory, Wild Endive, Blue Dandelion  
Scientific Name: *Cichorium intybus*  
Family: Daisy Family  
Characteristics: Grows 2-5 feet tall; large jagged, hairy leaves near the bottom of the plant with fewer, smaller leaves along the stem; blue daisy-like flowers with fringed edges (white and pink flowers occur occasionally); blooms in late spring and summer, during the morning hours only.  
A Few Words About This Weed: Few can argue at the beauty of this weed that was brought to this Country with European settlers and now flourishes in our most challenged natural spaces: along roads and railways, in empty lots, under viaducts and bridges. Chicory thrives in dry, sandy soil. The leaves are edible as a salad green and in fact, are often confused with the closely related endive. In Europe and some parts of this country, the root of chicory is roasted and used as a substitute for coffee or as a coffee flavor. Chicory is a highly valued crop in some parts of the world.
**Queen Anne's Lace**

*Other Common Names:* Wild Carrot, Bird's Nest, Devil's Plague  
*Scientific Name:* *Oaucus carota*  
*Family:* Parsley Family  
*Physical Characteristics:* Grows 2-4 feet; leaves are finely divided, resembling those of common garden carrots; clusters of small white flowers arranged in heads that resemble swatches of lace; usually a single dark red flower or small cluster of dark red flowers at the center of each flower head; blooms mid to late summer.  
*A Few Words About This Weed:* This European import was named for Queen Anne, an adept lace maker. It is said that the Queen pricked her finger while sewing lace, spilling a drop of blood on the intricate fabric. This would explain the single red flower at the center of each flower head. The purpose of that flower is not completely understood, some theories describe it as an attractor of pollinators. The carrots we eat and enjoy today are direct descendants of this plant. If you crush some leaves or the long taproot of Queen Anne's Lace between your fingers, you'll smell the relation!

**Horseweed**

*Other Common Names:* Mare's Tail, Canada Horseweed, Canada Fleabane  
*Scientific Name:* *Conyza canadensis*  
*Family:* Daisy Family  
*Characteristics:* Tall, erect stem that can grow to 6 feet; narrow 3-4 inch leaves that get smaller toward the top of the plant; small inconspicuous white flower heads branch out from central stem near top of plant; blooms summer and early fall.  
*A Few Words About This Weed:* This weed earned its name from the noxious oils and chemicals in its leaves and flowers, which can badly irritate the nostrils of horses. Horseweed is actually native to North America, but has become an agriculture nuisance, as well as an aesthetic weed. Each plant can produce 50,000 to 250,000 seeds and will grow in almost any environment, so it's no wonder it spreads so readily. In fact, horseweed is one of the few weeds that North America has given to Europe!
**Common Plantain**

**Other Common Names:** Broadleaf Plantain, White Man’s Foot, Healing Blade

**Scientific Name:** *Plantago major*

**Family:** Plantain Family

**Characteristics:** Leaves grow 1-6 inches long, are round to oval in shape, and grow close to the ground; noticeable parallel veins that run the length of the leaves; tall slender spike of inconspicuous flowers (or seeds); blooms summer and early fall.

**A Few Words About This Weed:** Native Americans named this plant the “white man’s footprint” because it seemed to follow the European settlers wherever they moved. Despite its true weediness, the plantain has a long history of human use. It has been used as an astringent to soothe insect bites and rashes, a laxative, a decongestant, a diuretic, a breath freshener, and an edible salad green. Apparently, many species of butterflies and moths enjoy the taste of plantain as well. Their larvae munch on the leaves, often dotting the foliage with noticeable holes.

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**Pineapple Weed**

**Other Common Names:** Disc Mayweed

**Scientific Name:** *Chamomilla suaveolens*

**Family:** Daisy Family

**Physical Characteristics:** Low-growing plant that reaches 3-12 inches; finely divided, feathery leaves; greenish yellow flower heads that have no showy petals and resemble small cones; blooms late spring and summer.

**A Few Words About This Weed:** This weed is actually native to some parts of North America, but is not native to Illinois and is, therefore, considered a weed. Pineapple weed is an extremely tough plant that can tolerate crushing footsteps and dry, dusty environments. It grows best in dry, disturbed ground like that found in most sidewalk cracks, vacant lots and parking lot perimeters. This weed gets its common name from the sweet smell emitted when its leaves and flowers are crushed. It is a relative of chamomile and can be used to produce a tea or a potpourri.
Common Ragweed

Other Common Names: None found.

Scientific Name: Ambrosia artemisiifolia

Family: Daisy Family

Characteristics: Grows 1-5 feet; deeply divided leaves with a feathery appearance; male and female flowers located on different positions on the stem - many male flowers grow on spike-like structures at the ends of stems, single female flowers grow on the same plant where leaves meet stems; emerges in spring and blooms in fall.

A Few Words About This Weed: Ragweed gets its name from the ragged look of the leaves. Although goldenrod is often blamed for the misery of hay fever sufferers, it's actually this plant (along with its relative, Giant Ragweed) that is to blame for most fall allergies. The male flowers on a single plant can produce over a billion pollen grains that have been known to travel distances up to 400 miles! Ragweed is a native plant that has great ecological value as food for honey bees, moths, a variety of birds, and small mammals.

Giant Ragweed

Other Common Names: Great Ragweed

Scientific Name: Ambrosia trifida

Family: Daisy Family

Characteristics: Grows very tall at 3-12 feet; large distinctive leaves, each divided into 3 (or sometimes 5) lobes; like the common ragweed, male and female flowers are found on the same plant, but separately; emerges in spring and blooms in fall.

A Few Words About This Weed: Giant Ragweed, like its relative, Common Ragweed, produces copious amounts of pollen and is one of the main causes of fall allergies. This plant is a native species, but has less ecological value than Common Ragweed. Its foliage is bitter and its seeds are extremely hard, so animals are not as apt to use it as a food source. The ragweeds also share a trait called allelopathy, which is the ability to produce toxins in the soil to inhibit competitive plant growth around them.
**Dandelion**

**Other Common Names:** Swine’s Snout, Priest’s Crown, Pissabed

**Scientific Name:** *Taraxacum officinale*

**Family:** Daisy Family

**Characteristics:** Sharply toothed leaves which grow close to the ground and often year-round; florescence is a dense head of bright yellow flowers that mature into a puffy white seed ball; grows almost anywhere, but is most successful in lawns, fields, roadsides, etc; blooms spring, summer, and early fall.

**A Few Words About This Weed:** Unlike many weeds that were accidentally introduced, the dandelion, with all its known properties, was introduced to North America deliberately by European settlers. It is one of the few weeds that can claim a human use for every part of the plant. The dandelion holds a wealth of medicinal value, it’s a nutritious food source for people and other animals, and it produces an attractive flower. The success of this plant in so many environments is largely due to this: (1) it has a long well-established taproot that is difficult to extract from the soil and (2) it makes a whole lot of seeds that can travel with the slightest breeze.

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**Prickly Lettuce**

**Other Common Names:** Wild Lettuce, Wild Opium

**Scientific Name:** *Lactuca scariola* or *Lactuca serriola*

**Family:** Daisy Family

**Characteristics:** Grows 3-5 feet; long sharply-lobed leaves that hug the stem near the leaf base; leaves are prickly around the edges and along the mid-vein on the lower surface; all parts of the plant emit a milky juice when cut; small; creamy yellow flowers bloom around the top of the plant mid to late summer to produce fluffy white seed heads.

**A Few Words About This Weed:** This weed is a relative of the garden-variety lettuces we commonly eat, although the leaves of this plant are bitter, even to cattle. In fact, the young leaves are known to contain a narcotic chemical that, if consumed in large quantities, can cause pulmonary emphysema in cattle. In small amounts, it has been used as a medicinal sedative for people.
**WHITE CLOVER**

*Other Common Names:* None Found.

*Scientific Name:* *Trifolium repens*

*Family:* Legume Family

*Characteristics:* Low-growing delicate plant with tri-lobed leaves. Each leaf displays a characteristic white 'V' called a chevron; white or pinkish flower heads that hold 20-50 tiny pea-like flowers each;

*A Few Words About This Weed:* White Clover, like the dandelion, was brought to North America because of its usefulness. The clover is a nutritious pasture plant for feeding livestock and an excellent soil enricher (its roots are associated with a bacteria that fixes nitrogen in the soil). This plant spreads rapidly by way of above-ground runners or stems that put down shallow roots at intervals. This growth strategy gives the white clover a mat-like appearance as it spreads. Bumblebees and honeybees frequent white clover for its nectar supply, which makes it an important source of honey for humans.

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**BINDWEED**

*Other Common Names:* Creeping Jenny, Wild Morning Glory

*Scientific Name:* *Convolvulus arvensis*

*Family:* Bindweed Family

*Characteristics:* Arrow-shaped leaves that reach 1-2 inches; plant grows horizontally in a creeping nature and often climbs other plants and structures with winding stems and tendrils; white funnel-like flowers that bloom early in the day and last only a single day; blooms spring, summer, and early fall.

*A Few Words About This Weed:* Bindweed is a true noxious weed, meaning its invasive qualities are harmful to the ecosystem that it inhabits. It has the ability to persist because of its extensive root system and hearty seeds. Once bindweed has infested an area, it could take years of work to get rid of it. It has a charming flower which can woo us into letting it grow, but this plant can do extensive damage to cropland and native habitats. If you see it... pull it!
**WOOD SORREL**

**Other Common Names**: Common Wood Sorrel, Sourgrass

**Scientific Name**: Oxalis acetosella

**Family**: Wood Sorrel Family

**Characteristics**: Small heart-shaped, "folded" leaves grow in groups of 3. Its tiny flowers are typically white or yellow though they can be pink or violet depending on species. Wood sorrel grows on lawns, along the sides of trails and roads, and in partially-sunny spots in the woods.

**A Few Words About This Weed**: Wood sorrel is widely considered to be the St. Patrick’s day plant, but is easily confused with clover. This plant boasts a sour taste and has long been useful for edible and medicinal purposes. Wood sorrel is high in vitamin C and has a delicious lemony sour taste. Medicinally, wood sorrel is soothing to the stomach, relieves indigestion, can produce an appetite, and can help stop vomiting.

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**PURSLANE**

**Other Common Names**: Duckweed, Fatweed, Pursley, Pussley, Verdolagas and Wild Portulaca

**Scientific Name**: Portulaca oleracea

**Family**: Purslane Family

**Characteristics**: Purslane has fleshy succulent leaves and stems with yellow flowers. They look like baby jade plants. The stems lay flat on the ground as they radiate from a single taproot sometimes forming large mats of leaves. Purslane is an annual reproducing from seeds and from stem pieces. Seeds of purslane have been known to stay viable for 40 years in the soil.

**A Few Words About This Weed**: Purslane is somewhat crunchy and has a slight lemony taste. Some people liken it to watercress or spinach, and it can substitute for spinach in many recipes. Young, raw leaves and stems are tender and are good in salads and sandwiches. Purslane may be a common plant, but it is uncommonly good for you. It tops the list of plants high in vitamin E and essential omega-3 fatty acids.
**Amaranth**

Other Common Names: Smooth Amaranth, Red Amaranth, Green Amaranth, Smooth Pigweed, Slim Amaranth

Scientific Name: *Amaranthus hybridus*

Family: Amaranth Family

Characteristics: Smooth Amaranth has two distinct plants that can be found growing in just about any garden. Red amaranth, has red stems and hair leaves. Green amaranth, has green stems and hairless leaves. Generally, amaranth leaves are oval, with a rounded tip, and their surface is lined with veins. You’ll also notice that its roots are tinged red, and its densely packed green flowers shoot out from the center of the plant’s highest leaf cluster.

A Few Words About This Weed: Smooth amaranth is easily controlled and not particularly competitive, it is recognized as a harmful weed of North American crops. The plant was used for food and medicine by several Native American groups and in traditional African medicine. Today, amaranth is still eaten in either the leaf or seed form.

**Thistle**

Other Common Names: Creeping Thistle, Canada Thistle, Cursed Thistle, Field Thistle

Scientific Name: *Cirsium arvense*

Family: Daisy Family

Characteristics: The light green stems are slightly ridged. Leaves are up to 8” long and 1” across, but usually about 3-4” long and 2/3” across. The leaf margins have numerous pale yellow thorns, and tend to be rather crinkly. The stems and leaf undersides can be hairless or somewhat hairy, depending on the variety. The leaf upper sides are hairless.

A Few Words About This Weed: Canada thistle is a vigorous, competitive weed that occurs in a wide range of habitats and is difficult to control due to its ability to regrow from its extensive, deep creeping root system. Gloves should always be worn when handling thistles. Remove thistle when small, see picture to the left, before their extensive root system takes hold.