

If you are tackling Horsetail, then damage the plant first by bashing it with a spade, as it will allow the herbicide to seep in. Where bindweed has tangled itself around a crop, tease out the leading tip or shoots and individually paint them with a glyphosate gel that you can buy from garden centres. Please take every precaution to protect yourself and others when using chemicals in the garden.

Ground elder and Couch grass can also be controlled with glyphosate, but regularly digging out the roots will also help in the eradication of these plants.

Please note: Before using chemicals on communal areas, please check who this land belongs to, and seek their permission. If you are using a spray licensed for use by home gardeners (amateur), then you must follow the instructions carefully on the label.

If this land needs treating with chemicals only licensed for use by professionals, then the legislation requires the user to have a certificate, or be supervised by a certificate holder (for training purposes). There is an exemption to this rule for those born on or before the 31st December 1964 (this exemption ceases on 25th November 2015). For further clarification see **Regulation 8 of the Plant Protection Products (Sustainable Use) Regulations 2012**.

Become a member of The National Allotment Society

Membership of The National Allotment Society comes with a raft of benefits, from discounts on horticultural products through to initial legal advice and horticultural expertise. To become a member visit www.nsalg.org.uk or call **01536 266576**.

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Dealing with brambles can be a thankless task because wherever the tips of the arching shoots touch the soil they will take root. This is how they are able to leap frog over the ground producing impenetrable thickets of horticultural barbed wire as they go. It is best to cut or strim the top growth down and then dig out the roots by hand. Always wear thick gloves and goggles when working in the bramble patch because the thorns are lethal.

Japanese Knotweed is a non-native invasive plant. Legislation exists concerning the disposal of this plant and professional help should be sought in dealing with it. Never dispose of the plant yourself by placing it into a landfill site, this is illegal. Always contact your local council environment officer for advice. Also see www.environment-agency.gov.uk/homeandleisure/wildlife/130079.aspx for guidance.

All weed material should be dead before it is **composted or disposed** of. You can kill the weeds off by starving them of sunlight (tied into a black plastic bag for some months), drowned in water inside a dark tub with a fitted lid or by drying them out in hot sunshine. The dead material can be added to your council's green recycling bins or your own compost heaps. Some people still like to burn their weeds on a bonfire, but please check your tenancy agreement first and consider your neighbours before setting it alight.

Health and safety should always be considered before undertaking any such work. A risk assessment is advisable, as is wearing protective clothing, the appropriate gloves and masks when using chemicals and ensuring that no adults, children or animals are nearby when machinery is being operated or chemical applied. Health and Safety advice is available as part of the National Allotment Society membership or see www.hse.gov.uk



Clearing an overgrown plot



Being faced with an overgrown plot might seem like an impossible and daunting job, but armed with a plan, the right tools and plenty of elbow grease; you can soon turn a wilderness into a workable piece of land ready for planting.

To start with... put the kettle on and reach for a reference book

Before you do anything the first task is to identify what types of weeds are growing on your plot. Try to name as many of them as you can, because once you know what they are, you are then best able to decide on how to deal with them. This isn't as difficult a job as it may first seem because weeds are wildflowers and there are plenty of cheap, informative wildflower books available that will help you to recognise them. It is surprising how quickly you will become hooked. The weeds will be classified as annuals or perennials. Annual weeds can simply be pulled up or cut down with a garden hoe as soon as they appear. Perennial weeds are more of a problem because they are able to survive in the ground from one season to another and require a more long term approach to get on top of them.

If your plot is overgrown with the more pernicious perennial weeds such as Japanese knotweed, bind weed or ground elder then you're going to need a more structured approach or seek out professional help.

When you have successfully identified the weeds and prepared your plan of attack then it is a good time to organise a 'clearing party' – invite a group of friends over, provide the tools and gloves and offer payment via a hot meal and several drinks afterwards.



The first job

First of all remove any large items of rubbish; a wheelbarrow could be a handy bit of kit to help with this job. Just a few words of advice before your enthusiasm gets the better of you. There may be hidden sharp edges and heavy items entangled in the undergrowth so please wear stout boots and heavy duty gloves to protect you from nasty cuts or bruises. Also take extra care when lifting; it is all too easy to overreach yourself and pull a muscle on the first day. Always use a crow bar to move heavy objects; never be tempted to use any of your precious gardening tools as levers because you will only end up snapping their handles.

Pace yourself, don't overdo things, take breaks and only work for a couple of hours at a time.

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Many sites have refuse points or if your landlord is the local council, talk to them about getting the rubbish removed. Failing that contact your local tip/recycling centre to see if they'll accept the items.

Once the ground is clear of rubbish you'll be able to see what is left to tackle.

Dealing with annual weeds

Like all living things, weeds need light in order to grow; so one of the simplest ways of killing off your weeds is by excluding the light. You can use either a natural or plastic mulch to do this job.

Natural mulches are thick coverings of organic material such as compost, manure, straw or well-rotted wood chips which you lay on top of the soil. They are best applied in the early Spring before the weeds have had a chance to grow and whilst the soil is still wet from the winter rains. They will break down over the summer and always have to be renewed annually. Any weeds that appear in the loose surface can easily be pulled out.

Rotovating your earth can be a quick way of cutting up and killing off weeds, but the danger is that if there are any rhizomes or perennial roots left in the ground, then they will be chopped up and come back with a vengeance next year. Digging by hand is recommended as the only effective way of removing perennial weeds.



Dealing with perennial weeds

Plastic mulches are thick black polythene sheets, which can be bought from garden centres. They should be laid directly on to the soil surface covering an area well beyond the weedy patch and the edges sliced down into the soil to prevent them from being lifted by any weed growth. Do not use carpets as they tend to rot, and leech nasty chemicals into the soil. There is also the risk that they'll get entwined with the soil as the fibres begin to break down. Like the natural mulches; plastic mulches need to be left in place for at least 12-24 months. One of the problems when using plastic mulches is where holes have to be cut in them to allow plants to grow through for example around potato haulms, fruit trees and bushes. These cut areas will allow the tips of shoots to grow through into the light so extra care must be taken to remove any shoot that appears before it has time to grow.

Once the weeds are dead, you should be able to dig them out easily. Don't forget to remove any rhizomes (stored roots found in the ground) as they might still have life in them.

Cardboard is sometimes recommended as a suitable material for mulching but it gets blown about and it doesn't break down consistently.

If you have cleared an area of a plot but do not wish to cultivate it straight away then it is recommended to sow a **green manure**. This will suppress the weeds, improve the soil structure and help to put nutrients back into the earth.

Using herbicides with glyphosate

Glyphosate is one of the few herbicides/weedkillers available to the amateur gardener. If it is used on perennial weeds it will eradicate them over a period of a few months. However they are not effective at killing Horsetail (Mare's Tail) but they can help in its control. Do not use glyphosate based herbicides on annual weeds, it is a wasteful and an inappropriate use of the chemical.

The timing of the applications of any herbicide is critical to obtaining the best results and to prevent the unnecessary waste of an expensive product. You should delay spraying until the perennial weeds are in full growth. Don't be tempted to start spraying the vigorous, young shoots early in the season because they will have the strength to grow back. Wait until just before flowering time before applying the knockout punch. The plant will be at its most vulnerable at this time; however this will mean some hand weeding before you get to spraying time.