



A New Tool For Home Gardeners To Fight Weeds

By Marie Woodward, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Ask any gardener what their worst chore is, and the majority would agree that weeding nears the top of the list. It's a never-ending battle of pulling out unwanted plants while protecting plants they aim to grow. But it's an important part of gardening. Weeds compete with flowers and vegetables for water and nutrients. In addition, they can attract unwanted pests and diseases. Mulch and weed barriers can offer some preventive measures but eventually weeds will return and while herbicides are effective there is a risk of damaging desirable plants when killing the unwanted ones. Not only do weeds grow in garden beds; pathways and patios are notorious for growing weeds between pavers. All this can take a physical toll on the back and knees. But there is a method that is gaining popularity with home gardeners: flame weeding.



Flaming weeds on patio. Photo by Marie Woodward

Flame weeding is the killing of weeds with intense heat produced by a fuel-burning device. For the home gardener, flame weeding usually relies on a portable propane tank attached to a hand-held torch to produce a carefully controlled and directed flame that briefly passes over the weeds. The goal is not to completely burn them to the ground but to destroy the plant tissue, which causes the plant to die. Annual weeds die pretty fast but perennial weeds may take a couple of treatments to destroy them, however, it's the most organic and environmentally safe way to

control weeds in the garden, on pathways and patios. It can also be used for broadleaf weeds in lawns. This is because mature grass blades are protected by a sheath. Unlike some chemicals, it won't harm edible plants, contaminate groundwater or have a negative effect on the environment and it's easy to use. However, be aware that some towns have restrictions on flame weeders. Check with your local fire department for any restrictions and keep an eye out for any local fire danger warnings before you consider using them.

Here are the tools needed for flame weeding:

1. A propane tank, which can be a 20-gallon tank used for gas grills but there are small camp size tanks.
2. A torch or wand (called a flamer), which can be bought at any big box store.
3. A flint striker to light the torch or a long stick lighter.
4. Protective equipment to protect from burns like thick work gloves and work boots.

Operating Flame Weeder Safely.

1. Read the instruction manual before using and follow any safety recommendations.
2. Have a fire extinguisher or garden hose nearby to extinguish any accidental fires
3. Never use it on extremely hot or windy days.
4. Keep flamer away from the hose that connects to the propane tank.
5. Always be cautious when lighting the flamer. Although the handle is cool the tip is extremely hot and can cause serious burns. Keep the flame away from people and pets.
6. Never use flame weeder on poisonous or toxic plants. It can cause contact dermatitis or if inhaled cause very serious health problems, which could require hospitalization.

Basic operating Procedure

I like to place my 20-gallon tank in a wagon to make it easier to move when operating the flame weeder. Holding the flamer about 6 inches away, use a slow sweeping motion over the weeds. Remember, the goal is not to burn up the weed. The goal is to destroy the plant tissue with extreme heat, which will kill it. This should only take a split second. For best results, wait for the weeds to grow about 1-2 inches before flaming.

Using a flame weeder is an effective way to control weeds without the physical toll of bending down and pulling or digging. Once you start getting comfortable using the flame weeder, you'll wonder how you ever gardened without it.

For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.