

— beauty of weeds

Steve Conaway Special to the Telegram & Gazette USA TODAY NETWORK

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As a gardener, my days are filled with weeds. Each morning, I step into the landscape to find the space seemingly transformed from the day before. Every rain shower sends plants rocketing upward. But in the lush tangle of late summer, I see familiar faces with names I know. Still, in the disoriented growth of warm days, I start second-guessing whether these plants are friends or foe. Species I planted myself during the tempered growth of spring suddenly have me questioning my decisions, as I reconsider their common names: “Joe-Pye weed, milkweed, ironweed, so-and-so weed” and “this-and-that weed.” I did not give their weedy monikers a second thought when I was planting them in the spring, when I was starved for green after a long winter. They were all politely lined up then, well-behaved in 4-inch pots, but now they are spilling over garden beds and shoving leafy elbows against their garden neighbors.

If I pause, step back, and take in the whole scene of bustling growth in the garden, those weedy names seem less immediately threatening. Instead, I am reminded of a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson: “What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.”

Reliable and resilient

Colonial farmers who plowed and pastured New England soils certainly had a hand in branding the vigorous native plants that sprouted back in their fields as weeds. But the exuberance of these species can be an asset to the modern gardener when grown in the right spaces and with a deeper understanding of their place in the ecosystem. With occasional editing, these native wildflowers can be the reliable and resilient performers threaded throughout a diverse

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species.

The broad clusters of dusky pink flowers on Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium* spp.) make a striking statement in both a naturalized meadow and a formal perennial border. Its late-summer blooms provide abundant nectar when other flowers are beginning to fade. Milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.) are similarly valuable. Their flowers feed a wide range of insects, while their foliage serves as an essential host for monarch caterpillars. Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) combines these ecological food-web benefits with striking orange flowers.

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Ironweed (*Vernonia* spp.) offers another late-season source of nectar, with rich purple flowers that attract butterflies and bees. Sneezeweed (*Helenium* spp.) brings cheerful yellow, orange, and red flowers to the late-summer landscape. Even pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*), sometimes regarded as a troublesome garden plant, has considerable value. Its violet berries are eaten by birds, and its vase growth habit, tropical-like leaves, and bold colors add visual drama to the garden.

I adore jewelweed (*Impatiens capensis*). It enthusiastically grows in dense stands, but the individual plants have an elegant, ethereal presence. Jewelweed appears soft and light in shady, moist edges of the garden, but the speckled orange flowers glow with vibrant intensity. Watching hummingbirds flit about the flowers and the spring-loaded seeds pop into the air is a joyful scene provided only by this so-called weed.

Looking past the 'weed' label

The etymological origins of the term weed are from Old English wēod, with a

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~~that causes economic losses or ecological damage, creates health problems for~~
humans or animals, or is undesirable where it is growing.” That last phrase is particularly important: *where it is growing*. A plant’s weediness is always a matter of context. An heirloom tea rose growing in a cornfield could be a weed. Joe-Pye weed growing in a native meadow is not. Milkweed in a migrating monarch corridor is not.

The word *weed* can be useful when we need to describe a plant that is causing harm or growing where it is unwanted, but it can also obscure the remarkable qualities of the plants themselves. Gardening at its best is a collaboration with the land, an opportunity to learn more about the interconnected lives and conditions that make up the whole. So, I will try to look past the label and see these weeds for what they are: plants whose virtues are not waiting to be discovered but already enriching our gardens in many ways.

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill team. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at [nebg.org](https://www.nebg.org). The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.

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