

## Gardening Article

August 21, 2022

### Reading between the weeds

“So many weeds! It’s just too much!”, exclaims my friend as I’m helping her move some plants. I look over to see her exasperatedly pointing at a patch of lawn that is no longer grass but a mix of other plants with varying shades of green. As I am wont to do, I examined the weedy patch and noticed some familiar plants, dollarweed (*Hydrocotyle* spp.) mixed in with some green kyllinga sedge (*Kyllinga brevifolia*). Right away I knew this wasn’t a weed problem but a soggy, wet soil problem. The clues were in the weeds.

A weed is simply a plant that is growing where we don’t want it to grow. While we may often view weeds as the bullies of the plant world, these plants are better viewed as opportunists, taking advantage of unoccupied spaces that meet their growing requirements. An abundance of a particular weed can indicate site conditions that may be the reason surrounding plants or grass are not thriving or getting established.

For example, take my friend's weed patch. Sedges, dollarweed, doveweed (*Murdannia nudiflora*), and false daisy (*Eclipta prostrata*) are all plants that prefer wet areas. These weeds can be a sign of overwatering, poor drainage, or irrigation leaks. As it turned out, my friend’s weed patch was near their drain spout. So, no matter how much she weeded they always returned because the site was not suitable for grass.

Weeds can be indicators for a variety of soil conditions. Goosegrass (*Eleusine indica*) can suggest compacted soils, often popping up around newly constructed buildings or homes where there’s been a lot of foot or vehicle traffic. Florida pusley (*Richardia scabra*) and spurges (*Euphorbia* spp.), may indicate the presence of plant-parasitic nematodes which can attack roots and stunt plant growth. The presence of Broadleaf plantain (*Plantago major*) can indicate a high soil pH (alkaline soil), and clovers and other legume weeds can suggest low nitrogen availability.

If you find yourself deep in the weeds, here are some tips.

- First, identify weeds and find out what type of growing conditions they prefer. If the weed suggests a soil issue, have your soil tested. Contact your local county Extension office to help with weed identification and management, and soil testing.
- Address the underlying site condition issue as indicated by the weed or soil test. You can either take steps to correct it or accept the condition and choose plants that prefer that type of environment. For example, since it was going to be more difficult to divert the drain spout, my neighbor decided to turn the wet area into a rain garden and chose plants that thrive in wetter soils.

- Have a plant or lawn re-establishment plan. Once you address the site condition and remove the weeds, establish new plantings soon thereafter and/or apply a thick mulch layer to prevent new weeds from taking advantage of the unoccupied space.

To learn more about managing your Florida landscape, reach out to UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County's office to speak with a Master Gardener Volunteer at (352) 955-2402 or [mag@alachuacounty.us](mailto:mag@alachuacounty.us) or visit Alachua County's Florida-Friendly Landscaping Program webpage at <https://bit.ly/AlachuaFFL>. Dr. Cynthia Nazario-Leary is the Environmental & Community Horticulture Extension Agent for UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County. Contact her at [cnazarioleary@ufl.edu](mailto:cnazarioleary@ufl.edu) or 352-955-2402.

