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Uptown Athol Across From The Common

Gardening

Weeds fertilize

By Pat Leuchtman
leisure Columnist

An old friend of mine who now lives in Canada came by on a flying visit and she took a brief tour of my garden. I was a little nervous because she is an excellent gardener herself, and one of the most knowledgeable people I know. She was admiring, which pleased me, but I was a little nonplussed that one of the things she most admired was the weeds. "Oh, how lucky you are. You have horsetail in your garden. Horsetail fixes silica in the soil."

Well, I didn't know what that meant. Should I eat the weeds? Leave them to grow to maturity next to the peas? What?

"No, no," Helen said. "Let them grow for a little while and then be grateful while you pull them out."

Helen flew away and left me to go to the library to do some research. I did know that weeds could be valuable because their roots are so deep and far ranging that they are able to reach and utilize those nutrients that are unavailable to garden vegetables. By piling those weeds on the compost pile or by tossing them on top of the mulched garden paths I could eventually turn them into fertilizer and make it more readily available to the garden.

I did not know that specifically horsetail (equisetum arvense) collected silica, or that two other weeds that grow in and around my garden, knotgrass (polygonum aviculare) and stinging nettle (urtica dioica) did also.

Actually, I discovered that stinging nettle and horsetail are wonderful plants. They are both rich in silica, and they both contain nitrogen, calcium and iron. Individually, horsetail is rich in cobalt and magnesium, and stinging nettle contains

potassium and copper. All these nutrients are necessary for good plant health.

I discovered that if I did not feed lamb's quarters (amaranthus retroflexus) to my pigs, I could add it to the compost pile and be adding nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, iron and sulphur.

I don't have any vetch in the garden, but it does grow nearby and it is also a generous contributor of nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, cobalt and copper.

These are just some examples of how valuable weeds can be as fertilizer. If you want to identify your weeds and find how specifically beneficial they can be to you, I recommend you read "Weeds: The Unbidden Guests In Our Gardens" by Mea Allan. Ms. Allan is full of other information about weeds and her book includes descriptions and drawings of many common weeds along with their various common names and their one botanical name. The index was particularly helpful.

By the way, I insist I am not being pedantic when I use a weed's Latin name. It's just that weeds go by so many different names that one man's pigweed is another man's careless weed. Chenopodium album and amaranthus retroflexus are sometimes both called pigweed, not because the plants are in any way related, but because they are both relished by pigs.

I don't know very many weeds by name and in my research I've been using several books. By checking Latin names I can be sure that the plant listed as Fat Hen in one book is definitely the same plant which is called Lamb's quarters in another book.

From now on I will be a little more aware that weeds are not an unmitigated curse.

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