

Weed Control

Ah, the gentle winter rains of the Sonoran desert. When they hit a regular pattern, coming every two weeks or so, they become a mixed blessing. On the positive side, they replenish our drought stricken aquifers and bring a beautiful display of spring wildflowers. The negative side, unfortunately, is all too apparent and is the bane of all homeowners, HOAs and anyone else who enjoys a clean, orderly landscape. Weeds!

There are several strategies one can use to keep the landscape relatively weed free. First let's talk about prevention. A method often used back east is to install a layer of plastic under the gravel during construction. Out here in the desert this practice has some drawbacks that should be considered. Number one, even though the plastic is installed under several inches of gravel, it will still decompose much sooner than you will like, probably due to the extreme heat. Secondly, termites really love the dark, moist environment under the plastic and are often found thriving there years later when the plastic starts to come up through the gravel and the whole mess has to be removed. A third factor is most of the weeds that cause us problems do not need much soil, water, or time to grow and will be just as happy living in the gravel covering the plastic as in your neighbors vacant lot.

A second, and much more widely used strategy in this area, is applying chemicals. The two types used for weed control are pre-emergent and post-emergent. Pre-emergents are applied to the landscape either as a granule or liquid. Following application, most pre-emergents must be watered in within a certain period of time to "activate" the chemical. After moving through the gravel or turf layer to the underlying soil, the chemical forms a protective layer and it is this layer that prevents most seeds from germinating. Depending on the rate and method of application, you can expect to get at least six months of weed control.

Once your weeds are visible, it is time to rely on post-emergents, as pre-emergents are of no help once weeds have reached this stage. There are a number of chemicals on the market in this category. Most work on contact and may be broken down in two categories; contact and systemic. Contact herbicides kill on contact with the leaves of the plant, usually showing visible signs of damage within a few days or even hours. Often only the top, above ground portion of the plant is killed by these chemicals, leaving the root to come back another season. Examples of this class of chemicals would be 2-4-D and Diquat. A systemic chemical is absorbed into the plant and will travel from leaves to roots, usually killing the entire plant. Plants treated with a systemic are slower to show signs of damage, sometimes taking up to three weeks to do so. Round-Up is a well-known example in this category.

A word of caution about chemicals: most of these chemicals can be purchased at your local hardware store and are pretty good at doing what they say they will do. **You absolutely must read and follow the label directions.** Applying the correct amount in the correct way is a MUST for good control. More, in the case of chemicals, is definitely not better. Anyone applying chemicals to land they do not own must hold a license from the Arizona Structural Pest Control Commission. This includes landscapers working commercially or one neighbor helping out another. Employing an unlicensed company or individual carries its own set of risks and rewards and should be weighed carefully before engaging their services.

The last and most labor-intensive form of weed control is mechanical (or just plain ol' pulling, hoeing, and weed eating.) Not too much to discuss here. If you have weeds already up and growing in your landscape, this is perhaps the first step to getting back to that clean, orderly look you want. Even though you can kill the 2-foot tall weed with Round-Up, you still have a 2-foot (now dead) weed in your yard which most wives and homeowners associations take a pretty hard line on. Once you have cleaned your yard, you can go back to the preventive stage and hope to avoid all the labor and mess next year.