

The virtues of weeds

- [Catherine Marshall](#)
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I've suffered my first mosquito bite of spring. A nasty little welt rising on my ankle as I planted new snow peas and weeded the spinach and wrested the nightshades from their firm rooting in my vegetable garden. Here it comes, I thought, one of the creaturely invasions that will try its hardest to ruin summer, the only deterrence to spending many long evenings in the balmy outdoors.



The nightshades are a plague, too; they've spent winter feasting on the richly composted soil, growing tough and ropy and tall as Jack's beanstalk and thieving nutrients from the kale and tomatoes and broccoli. I discard them in a pile, their blooms startled, their root-balls refusing to let go of the soil in which they've embedded themselves like concrete.

Nearby, a ripe, perfect lemon lies beneath the lemon tree; I pick it up and turn it over and find it's been pecked and tasted and sullied and rejected, no doubt by that other nuisance, cockatoos. The wild onion grass is driving me wild; its blades protrude from the flower beds and the lawn, teasing me with their deep, unseen roots and indestructible bulbs.

I can't even bear to look at the asparagus fern which has risen from the dead in a corner of the garden, its rhizomes riddled with malignant polyps and spreading like a tumour beneath the soil's surface.

The freesias, however, are a delight, for they flower in random places on their knife-edge leaves in yellows and whites and mauves, their beauty absolving them from their dubious classification as weeds. They delight the eye, therefore they are forgiven. But why not the nightshade and the onion weed, with their delicate flowers? What makes a weed a weed, anyway?

Apart from the ruinous environmental consequences of exotic plants and animals, when does their ubiquity become an invasion? Why do we value *this* plant (which, despite lashings of love and attention, often fails to thrive) more highly than *that* (which flourishes in direct disproportion to our abhorrence of it)? And how can we justify an abundance of tropical fish or tuna but decry a supposed infestation of sharks, welcome the cackle of the kookaburra while disdaining the noisy miners, delight in the mobs of kangaroos but condemn the so-called plagues of mice?

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It's a question I've often pondered. Scientifically speaking, weeds are plants that tend to produce lots of seed, can survive in the soil for long spells and are able to easily establish themselves in sometimes inhospitable conditions. Weeds, in other words, are hardy and resilient; they succeed where other plants fail. Ralph Waldo Emerson was correct when he said that a weed was 'a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered'.

Mosquitoes, similarly, flourish under trying conditions, remaining viable during winter and arising in great gusts as wet, warm weather releases them from their dormancy. For every mozzie that is slapped to death one hundred more will hatch from eggs nourished by another human's blood. Like cockroaches (that other reviled creature), they will surely prevail (mammalian blood supply notwithstanding) even when humans have done themselves out of a planet.

That's a demise we appear to be hastening, for the world is roaring its final lament: firestorms raging, wetlands crisping, oceans circulating with more plastic than water. The greatest threat, after all, comes not from those fauna and flora we seek to classify, to control and to circumscribe, but from humans. Without us, the weeds would flourish in the regions that evolved them, the sharks would feed unmolested, and the mosquitoes would pollinate flowers just as they've always done...



Catherine Marshall is a Sydney-based journalist and travel writer.

Main image: Weeds (Unsplash)

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