

## Weed of the Week – June 10

### Amaranthus or Pigweed (*Amaranthus spp.*)

This week's plant may be regarded as a weed, an ornamental, or a crop, depending on your point of view. It is included here because it is widespread in our gardens, and some gardeners grow it intentionally, so it will always be around. There are dozens of species of *Amaranthus*, but the ones found in our area are quick growing annuals.

The most common species found in our gardens is the highly variable *Amaranthus hybridus*, which ranges from a dull green with reddish tints in its stem to completely dark red. The latter form is quite beautiful with its dark red foliage and bright crimson flower and seed heads in the fall. It makes a stunning contrast with green foliage, and cultivars are often used in gardens. Many of our gardeners leave a few simply to add beauty to their gardens.



The only reason this genus is considered a weed is that it produces thousands of tiny black seeds that are winter hardy, and so it comes up in huge numbers in the spring. It is very easy to control with tilling and hoeing, so it need not be a big worry. The only problem occurs if gardeners do their early tilling and then neglect to remove the later emerging seedlings. The plant will increase exponentially from year to year, and since it can grow to over a meter tall it will shade out desired crops.

Pigweed is an unfortunate nickname, because it reinforces the idea that these plants are undesirable. Traditionally, various amaranthus species have been cultivated for their leaves and their seeds. The very young leaves can be used as a salad vegetable, and slightly larger ones can be cooked and eaten like spinach. They are extremely nutritious. The seeds were used as a very important grain by the South American natives before Columbus, and are higher in protein and certain vital nutrients than almost any other seed crop. Unfortunately, the Spanish conquerors banned their cultivation, and the world almost lost this “crop of the future” until it was revived in the last few decades by health food enthusiasts. While the commercial seeds in stores are light brown, the wild varieties produce smaller black seeds with similar nutritional properties. They can be made into a porridge, added to breads or eaten in a variety of other ways. Collecting them is a labour of love, but worth the effort.



The best advice is to remove the seedlings, which grow very rapidly, by pulling or hoeing. If you feel adventurous, leave a few of the healthiest specimens near the edge of your garden and try something new.