

Weed of the Week – May 19

Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*)

Garlic mustard is an invader in our area. It arrived with the early pioneers, but it has fairly recently become a major pest in natural areas, where it is taking over the forest floor and displacing native wildflowers. An individual plant can produce hundreds of seeds, which can be transported and will survive for years in the soil. The roots also exude compounds that inhibit the growth of other species.

While it is relatively easy to control on a garden plot, it is important that gardeners be vigilant and not allow this plant to flower and set seed. It is very important that gardeners whose plots are next to fence lines keep the weeds clear right to the fence.



Garlic mustard is a biennial plant, meaning that it grows and stores food for its first year and then flowers in its second. The first year plants consist of whorls (rosettes) of bright green kidney-shaped leaves with slightly toothed edges (photo left). They can be removed quite easily by plucking or hoeing. By the second year, the plant sends up a tall flowering spike with small, white, four-petaled flowers and pointed leaves (photo below right). It has a strong tap root in its second

year, which must be pulled to prevent secondary flowering. When the soil is wet and loose, the tap root will come out fairly easily. It is also important to chop up the mature plant before composting it, if it has already formed seed pods, as the food reserves in the root can be used to complete the development of the seeds.

The leaves of garlic mustard can be eaten as a salad green if picked before flowering, though it has a fairly strong garlic flavour and a slightly bitter aftertaste. It is very rich in vitamins A and C. There are lots of recipes on-line for garlic mustard pesto and other dishes. The young leaves can also be steamed and used as a spinach-like vegetable. Since they remain green all winter, they can be a treat when no other local greens are available.

While this weed is unlikely to become a major problem in a tended garden, do the surrounding natural environment a favour and make sure you limit the production of new seed that can spread to less controlled areas

