

Weed of the Week – June 3

Yellow Nutsedge (*Cyperus esculentus*)

After the rather heavy article on Ragweed last week, let's look at a somewhat more benign weed with some interesting features.

Most gardens in our area will have some yellow nutsedge in them. The plant looks like a bright green annual grass when it first comes up, but you can tell it is a true sedge, because its stem is triangular when rolled between the finger and thumb. At low densities, nutsedge does not cause much of a problem in small garden plots, but it is a major pest for vegetable crop farmers because it can increase rapidly by means of small tubers. Dense populations can steal water and nutrients from crops, and can even produce chemicals that reduce yields of corn, soybeans and potatoes.



Nutsedges produce small tubers at the ends of underground stems (rhizomes), and each tuber can give rise to a new plant. Since a single healthy plant can produce up to 1000 tubers in a year, and the tubers can overwinter, these plants will rapidly take over in damp soil if not controlled. Tilling simply redistributes the tubers, so it is only effective if it is done repeatedly during the growing season to prevent maturation. If you haven't time or energy to dig up and remove the tiny tubers, the best control strategy is to prevent significant tuber formation by disrupting the life cycle. Pulling the plants is not difficult when the soil is wet. This leaves the tubers behind, but they must use much of their stored energy to regenerate leaves. Repeating the removal process at least three times over the season will reduce the surviving tuber population substantially, allowing a measure of control that is simple and effective. You will never get rid of all the tubers, but you will prevent severe competition with your crops.

A more fun way to manage this weed is to eat the tubers, which are a delicacy in Spain. The commercial variety, called chufa, is grown in Africa, southern Europe and the southern US. An alternate name for the plant, ground almond, provides a fitting description of the tubers. They are about the size of an almond, and after being boiled in lightly salted water for 20 minutes and dried they taste amazingly like salted almonds. They are very rich in monounsaturated fats and fibre. Collecting and preparing them is time consuming, but I try to do it once each year for the experience.

In Valencia, Spain the tubers (called chufas) are ground with water, sugar and spice to make a milky cold drink called horchata de chufas.