

Weeds

Bradley Miller
miller@iastate.edu

Half of the harm done in the world
Is due to people who want to feel important
-T.S. Eliot

Many environmentalists today romanticize the idea of a *laissez faire* approach to gardening. Michael Pollan argues that not weeding is always a kind of human conceit. Humans' excessively high opinion of themselves and their place in the world has skewed some views of what a weed is and what it represents.

The idea of the weed is a human construct. A weed is only a weed because we perceive it that way. Starting to think of weeds like this generally leads to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a weed. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, a weed is simply a plant whose virtues we haven't discovered yet (Pollan: 116). This assumes that a weedy garden is a natural state. And so being natural is the way things would be without human intervention. In a way, this hints at the flaws seen with a terrarium view of nature. This falls apart quickly when we examine the niche weeds have in the world. Either way, the idea that we are outside of the system, passing our judgment on what is natural and what is not, is an exercise in conceit.

Watching the unrestrained growth of weeds has provided a canvas for humans to paint their view of the world. Emerson wrote, "nature always wears the colors of the spirit." Pollan remarks that this means, "we don't see nature plain, only through a screen of human tropes." (Pollan: 120-121) Trope is from the Greek *tropos*, which is to turn in way, manner, or style (Merriam-Webster). Humans put their own spin on what they want to see in nature.

The idea that weeds somehow represent wildness and wilderness is among these skewed views of nature. Pollan describes how before the romantics, the hierarchy of plants was thought to mirror that of human society. The weeds were the common people, with the civilized hybrids the royalty. The romantics took their new positive view of the common people, and set it on the weeds as well. They saw hybrid manipulated garden flowers as slaves to men. Thus, weeds became the emblem of freedom and wildness. This romantic view of weeds is strongly shown in this stanza by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

*What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.*
(Pollan: 120-121)

This worship of weeds finds a welcome home in the thoughts of American naturalists. Whitman and Thoreau often used the idea of the wild weed as the symbol of nature's free wildness. However, this idea isn't what nature is. A democracy isn't forming in an unkempt garden. What is being described is what our conceited thoughts want to see in it.

Logically, this had led many gardeners, seeking to have a closer connection to nature, to regard weeds as not something to control. In this view of weeds, to dictate what species may live in a garden and which may not seems very authoritarian. However, as Michael Pollan found in his garden, there are some problems with this approach. The first summer Pollan allowed the weeds to grow up with the annuals he had planted. This worked out all right; there weren't any noticeable effects that the plants weren't all getting along in a natural order. Then the next summer, the weeds were taking over. They overshadowed and pushed out the plants that Pollan had originally desired. When he tried to revert back to a small level of weeding, he found the weeds too well established. He couldn't save what he planted from the encroachment of the weeds. The summer after that, he started over and designed his plantings to make it easier to weed from the start. For the person seeking to be in harmony with nature, this seems like a contradictory offensive. It is only a contradiction if one takes the view that they are above it all and not an active player in the natural system.

Weeds have a curious place in nature. These plant species are not found in an area that has had the time to be fully claimed by nature. They are only found in the disturbed soil that we have wrought. The niche of weeds in nature is in the opportunities we have made for them in our activities of cultivation. Given the proper amount of time, a garden left to go to wildness, would not contain many of the weeds. The roots of weeds not only break concrete, but the perception that we can separate nature from ourselves. They interfere with the reasons we are cultivating a garden. If we allow the weeds to go unchecked, we will not be able to get the products we want from it. Therefore, weeding is an essential part of gardening. Thoreau holds onto his biocentrism as he writes, "The sun looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction...Do {these beans} not grow for woodchucks too...How, then, can our harvest fail? Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds?" Pollan rebukes, "Sure, Henry, rejoice. And starve." (Pollan: 128) Anthropocentrism is one form of human conceit. Biocentrism is another form. It is still an excessively high opinion of the place of humans in the world.

Before we can look to nature as a cure for culture, we have to first get through the cover that culture has been laid over it. How we view the weed, whether positively or negatively, has been turned by our own construct of what a weed is. When a weed is thought of in a positive light, it is often anthropomorphized to represent the common people's freedom embodied by wildness. In the end, this is a problem as we fail to see that plants that we most often see as weeds are not common in the wilderness. They are in fact opportunists, produced by our own work. The whole relationship we have with the weed is constructed from our views of the world, not by our observations of the world. Our own conceited view of how we think the natural world should work has skewed our view of reality.

Bibliography

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Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>