

# The Way with Weeds

By E. Kay Robinson

**I**F you leave matters to your gardener, weeds can be treated with silent contempt. Their hour will arrive when he has taken off his coat, tightened his belt and started to dig. He will not stop digging until he has converted all the flower-beds into neat brown puddings of various shapes. "Weeds?" he says in reply to inquiries, "yes, there was a tidy few. But there ain't none now." And he is approximately correct. Between his upheaving spade and horny, crablike fingers it is a poor weed that has escaped; and even then the odds are that it is buried eight inches deep and root upwards. It will be a poorer weed still when the earthworm has done with it.

But the radical revolution which the gardener effects at fixed periods has its drawbacks. With the weeds have gone all kinds of interesting seedlings and offshoots which you had purposed to cherish; for the gardener's spade has no bowels. Those, therefore, who would like to ascertain by experience what a rank jungle they can have next year, by carefully fostering this year's seedlings, may dispense with the gardener's spade and set about "doing up" the flower beds themselves with a trowel.

Chickweed, for instance, provides a liberal education by itself. Not unpleasing to look upon, as a tangled green mat among your perennial Alpine creeping plants, this innocent-looking weed invites early attention. You pluck a strand or two and they come away readily in the hand. "Birds like chickweed"; so you place them on one side for your bullfinch. In doing so you notice that there are no roots attached. This must be seen to; and you proceed to investigate matters from the point where the strands broke off short. You find the plant obligingly simple in construction. About forty thin stalks, each branching in many directions, radiate from a common centre. They are so tangled up with everything around that you are rather proud of your generalship when you have them all, except two or

three, firmly grasped in your hand. A slight pull—it does not require a strong one to break the thin stem of the chickweed—and the whole thing comes off short in your hand leaving the roots in the ground. From these you know that a new plant will spring in less than no time, so you search carefully for the broken stem. The part left is about a quarter of an inch long, as slippery as an eel and as thin as soda-water wire, and holds to the soil like grim death. It "gives" at last and brings up several small clods of earth with it. You shake these off and place the root triumphantly in the basket.

A flourishing dock plant catches your eye. Four times a day you have passed that flower-bed and you have always had an uneasy idea that something was wrong with your prim battalion of mignonette. There was a dash of rankness about it and a slight discord in the shades of green. Somehow you were always too busy to investigate, but now, when the rain has flung the straggling mignonette, heavy with moisture, to the ground, there is no disguising the fact that the clump has been 30 per cent. dock all the while. Indignation at having been imposed upon lends vice to the grip with which you seize the dock, and a sudden upward jerk leaves you with enough leaves in your hand to feed a rabbit; but the root of the dock is still in the ground. It is the peculiarity of this plant to anchor itself to the Antipodes; though with perseverance you can excavate a good deal of its root in three-inch lengths. The mignonette looked dragged before you commenced your fray with the dock; by the time you have finished it is only fit for the rubbish heap, and—up it comes, too. With a sight of relief you notice that, although weeds may cling to their ill-gotten territory with all the tenacity of Frenchmen, mignonette, like other garden flowers, yields gently at the first time of asking. This is a beneficent arrangement of Nature to teach man caution and self-restraint in weeding. ☺ For man is naturally lazy; and if things were arranged contrariwise he would cheaply dis-

criminate between weeds and seedlings by giving them a tug all round. Now he has to be careful. If he touches a flower-plant, it comes out of the ground at once; if he passes over a weed, thinking it may be a flower, it strikes roots through several geological strata and spreads abroad like the rumour of a dog-fight.

Quietly aggravating weeds, in the matter of pretending to be flower-plants and refusing to "come up" if the fraud is detected, are the various spurges. The emerald hue of their neatly rounded leaves suggests engaging potentialities of blossom, and it is not until they have shed most of their seed that you realise the deception which has been practised upon you by their subterfuge of bright green flowering bracts instead of flowers. Then you pluck at them, and each breaks off short and leaves a drop of milk-white fluid upon your index finger. This fluid will, says rustic legend, cure warts if you have them or give you warts if you have them not. As you have no burning desire for warts you pause from your labours once more to wipe your fingers. In doing so you leave upon the handkerchief a good deal of garden earth which you may transfer later to your forehead and the side of your nose when you inop your heated brow.

But a man who weeds his own garden must not be afraid of a little earth upon the side of his nose. It is the badge of honest toil; and so is a thorn in his finger. You never realise the true meaning of the recurved thorns on a rose-bush until you have done a little weeding. Botanists, by the way, join issue with the poets and the public generally by asserting that no roses have thorns, but only "prickles," which are "modified setaceous processes of the epidermis." It is good moral training, when you have a few buried in the epidermis of the back of your hand, to try and remember this. And you can get them into the back of your hand without any trouble whatever. All you have to do is to endeavour resolutely to clear away the bindweed from a rose-bush, and Nature does the rest. In the first place the bindweed has so cork-screwed itself in and out of the main stems of the rose-tree that you are tempted to insinuate

your hand into narrow places when there is barely room for it. Then you grab several strands of the bindweed and pull gently and cautiously. The bindweed "gives" just enough to suggest that you can pull it clean away, and you put a little more force into the tug. Then something happens. It may be that the soft white root of the bindweed has parted several inches underground, or that one or more of the twisted strands at one side have loosened their hold. The result is the same. Your even-handed pull is suddenly converted into a sideways jerk, and a number of the modified setaceous processes of the epidermis of the rose-tree are buried to the hilt in the back of your hand. Each leaves an angry blood-black spot which aches, suggesting that the points may have broken off inside, with blood poisoning to follow. One is almost inclined, after a few of such experiences, to finish the work and the rose-bush with a niblick. But the bindweed would laugh at niblicks. Nothing less than the gardener's spade will reach the vital principle in its roots, and then most of the foundations of the rose-bush come up with it. You can, however, discourage the bindweed a good deal by tracing its convolutions downwards to the point where it leaves the ground and with a careful, perpendicular pull you may unearth many inches of white worm-like stalk. If you leave these lying about, they will take root afresh in the ground, and if you decide to clear them away you will find that the twining green stems which grow out of them had straggled off in the direction of all the neighbouring parishes and taken a twist round many chrysanthemums and geraniums *en route*. It will be quite an assortment of things that goes with the bindweed to the rubbish heap; for its cork-screw folds are just loose enough to yield when you pull and yet just tight enough to lasso the best of the leaves and flowers.

There are two kinds of bindweed, the large and the small. If either did not exist, you would say that the other was the greatest possible nuisance in a flower-bed.

The dandelion should, in spite of the botanists, be classed with the dock. Like that hardened sinner, it has roots which go

down to the source of all evil, and leaves which flourish exceedingly among your violets. Presently, it betrays its presence by a gaudy yellow flower, that catches your eye one day as you hurry away to catch a train and causes you to make a mental memorandum that you will have it out of that to-morrow. When you come back, the flower has shut up, and you are not reminded of the hateful presence. To-morrow you forget and it seems only the next day or so when the dandelion fluff is wandering with the wind all over the place. This decides you to immediate action, and, grasping the offender by its coronal of spreading greenery you tug at him and he leaves in your hand what looks like an assortment of greengrocer's lettuces, but no roots. These have to be searched out with as much circumspection and care as the roots of dock or Sanskrit.

In the case of weeds, where all must be placed upon your *index expurgatorius*, it may seem waste of time to dilate upon individually objectionable characters; but no reference to the subject could be so cursory, and no experience of miscellaneous gardening so brief as not to include the nettle. This, indeed, is the only weed which compels the most inobservant to master some of the rudiments of botany. The fool who puts his hand on a thistle deserves to be pricked, as surely as he who sticks his finger in the parrot's cage must expect to be bitten. There is as little disguise about the thistle as the bird. The weed's spines shout at you. So does the parrot. But the solitary nettle, the innocent-looking pioneer of a pestilent colony, might be a flourishing *Salvia* or Canterbury bell, and may lead any one into painful mistakes. It is, therefore, part of your duty towards your family to clear your mixed borders of nettles. And not every one who is familiar with the three-foot rankness of the clustered common nettle is also aware that there is a nasty little insect of a nettle, which may be only a few inches high, that stings just as badly. You find this out when, with that easy jerk of the wrist which brings up all the little weeds one after the other, you are just going to add your first specimen of *Urtica urens* to

the weed-heap. It is too late to let go them, for it has already stung you; but you will look out for it in future and not weed so fast. (It may not be out of place here to refer to a characteristically mean action of this weed in connection with myself. My readers may have wondered what an illustration of a nettle was doing in a previous article, which dealt with the flowers of winter. That illustration had been supplied to the Editor as evidence that pictures of weeds were not worth reproduction; but of course the weed smuggled itself among the winter flowers and appeared as such. A better instance of the low cunning of these despicable vegetables could hardly be quoted.)

Compared with those mentioned, the rest of the weed family may be summarily dealt with. The Shepherd's Purse comes up in multitudes everywhere, looking like seedlings, and when in doubt you leave it for a day or two it seizes the interval to flower and fructify and scatter its seeds. Perhaps that is why its seed pods are called Shepherd's Purses; when you come to them they are always empty. Besides these, there are various kinds of small things like dandelions in miniature with varying degrees of adhesiveness to the soil, and others which would be starworts if they had any flowers; others again which pretend to be mignonette, and straggling little speedwells and pimpnells whose tiny blue or scarlet blossom might look handsome under a magnifying glass. There are also some thistles which break off short, goosefoot which brings up the flower-bed with it, and cleavers which pulls up all the flowers round it. Lastly, there is grass of many kinds; sometimes a single threadlike stalk which finds its way upwards to preposterous altitudes among the fuchsias, and waves its feathery head aloft; sometimes a dense tuft of matted fodder which comes up with a bang, after a hard pull, and leaves a large hole in the flower-bed. Sometimes there is grass so brittle that it comes away at every joint except the root, and sometimes so tough that it cuts the fingers. By the time you have cleared a long flower-bed of grass alone, you have richly earned a backache.