

Q: Are there any organic herbicides that are safe for me to use in a garden where children play nearby? What about using propane burners?

A: There are several herbicides with organic rating on the market at this time, but you will need to read the labels carefully and apply as recommended. These contact herbicides will damage green leaves of both pest plants and desirable plants, and should be used with care. The organic herbicides can be soap, clove-oil or acetic-acid/citric based, and work best when sprayed on small annual weeds. Repeat applications are usually necessary. One product that has been widely advertised as an organic herbicide is corn-gluten meal, sold under several different trade names. Unfortunately, the trials with this product in California have not shown much, if any, weed control unless the product is applied so thickly that it works as very expensive mulch. Birds are quite fond of it as well. The research report on Corn Gluten Meal can be accessed at the URL: <http://ucce.ucdavis.edu/freeform/slosson/documents/1999-20002063.pdf>

Propane weed burners must be used with great caution. This is a very dry year, and the idea of accidentally catching your fence or shrubs on fire would not endear you to the fire department or your neighbors. The propane weed burners are not used to 'torch' the weeds, but are quickly passed over the plant surface in order to burst the cell walls. They must be handled carefully by someone comfortable with the equipment and with a partner with a hose standing by.

In a vegetable garden, keeping soil mulched with at a minimum of 3" of material will work well to prevent weed problems unless you have Bindweed or Bermuda grass, neither of which respond to herbicides either. Dry lawn clippings that have not been sprayed with weed killer are an excellent mulch material to use. Coffee grounds, weed-free hay and composted leaves are other good mulches that can keep most weed seeds from germinating. In shrub borders or small orchards, shredded tree prunings can also be used. Weed barrier fabrics are useful in new plantings, but difficult to install in established gardens.