Attack of the Pigweed: A Farm's Guide to the Weed From Hell
When a Weed Goes to War...The More You Know

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Pigweed — Scientifically Known as Amaranth

For the past 5 years since we took over this farm. Every year a new weed raises from the ground. This year it was **Amaranth** I spoke to a few people about the plant and they were actually clueless about what it was, so I thought I would let you all know about it—especially if you have it showing up in your yard or pastures.

Before I investigated this plant, I shredded two zero-turn mower belts at $150 each. I also demolished two spools of weed-whacker line. The roots of this plant are like turnips, some half an inch or more thick. It can grow anywhere from 3 to 10 feet tall, has some seriously nasty spines, and a single plant can produce tens of thousands to potentially hundreds of thousands of seeds. Cut it at the wrong time and ***YOU ARE SCREWED***!

From roughly August through October, these plants can be producing and spreading seeds, so **DO NOT JUST GO OUT THERE AND CUT THEM DOWN NOW!** Once those tiny seeds hit the soil, you may have created next year's problem—and possibly the problem for several years after that. Some pigweed seeds can remain viable in the soil for years, which is one reason these plants can seem to magically reappear after you thought you had finally won the battle.

I tried shoveling them out and using a weed puller, which worked to some extent. They are nearly impossible to pull on a dry day because those roots are no joke. If you are going to try pulling them, a little moisture in the soil can make the job considerably easier. The important thing is to get the plant out before it has matured enough to produce seed.

If you're going to mow them, I'd recommend using equipment that doesn't have a belt-driven deck if possible. My EGO mower has actually been doing surprisingly well with them.

I'm thinking about taking the skid steer to these areas during the winter and seeing what I can do to get them under control. My goal is not necessarily to win the entire war in one afternoon. At this point, I'm happy with simply preventing the plants from producing another generation of little green monsters.

Now here is where pigweed gets interesting.

"Pigweed" isn't actually one specific plant. It is a common name used for several species in the Amaranthus family. Some are serious agricultural weeds, while other types of amaranth are intentionally grown as ornamental plants, leafy vegetables, or grain crops. In fact, amaranth has been cultivated as a food crop for thousands of years.

And why is it called pigweed?

One explanation is surprisingly appropriate. Some amaranths commonly grew in areas where pigs had been rooting around in the soil. Pigs disturbed the ground and brought buried seeds closer to the surface, and the fast-growing weeds would take advantage of that freshly disturbed soil.

In other words, the pigs basically helped plant the pigweed.

The plant also has a much more impressive history than its reputation as the bane of my mower.

Amaranth was an important food crop for ancient cultures in the Americas, including the Aztecs. The tiny seeds can be eaten as a grain even though amaranth isn't technically a true cereal grain. Today, grain amaranth is still used in foods ranging from flour and breakfast cereals to a Mexican treat called alegría, made by popping the tiny seeds and mixing them with sugar or honey.

So, technically, the same plant family that is costing me mower belts has also been feeding people for thousands of years.

There is another reason I'm taking this plant seriously around our farm: we have goats and sheep, too. I was originally told that pigweed could be particularly bad for goats, so I started looking into it. What I found was a little more complicated, but definitely worth paying attention to.

Some pigweed species can accumulate nitrates, and certain species contain other compounds that can be harmful to livestock. Sheep are considered particularly susceptible, and goats are notorious for eating a much wider variety of plants than horses or cattle. In other words, I don't want to find out the hard way which animals on my farm think pigweed is a salad bar.

The risk can also increase when plants are stressed by drought, frost, or certain growing conditions. That means a plant that animals have ignored all summer isn't necessarily something I'd suddenly consider safe because it has turned into fall forage. If you have large patches of pigweed where sheep, goats, horses, or other livestock can reach it, identification is important. And if an animal is actually consuming significant quantities, I'd rather make a call to the veterinarian than assume the plant is harmless.

I've even seen the horses start to nibble on it, but then they get that slobbery, foamy mouth like they do after eating clover. I wouldn't assume that reaction means the plant is safe, however. If you have large amounts of unidentified pigweed in a pasture, especially if animals are actively eating it, it's worth getting the plant positively identified before letting them continue to consume it.

I'm still learning about this stuff, so if you've got pigweed on your property, don't assume it's harmless just because you've seen it before. I'm doing some digging for the next issue of the magazine and will have more information on identification, control, and why some species have become such a pain in the ass.



For now, my advice is simple: learn what you have, don't let it go to seed, don't mow mature plants when they're loaded with seed, and don't underestimate a plant that can destroy a $150 mower belt.

The More You Know