

What is a weed?

The activities on the next three pages (What do you know? Would you know a weed if you met one? and Alien invaders) are designed to explore students' prior knowledge of weeds, and generate class discussion. Teachers who are themselves unfamiliar with weed issues should read the notes on this page – they will help direct and stimulate initial discussions.

1. What are Weeds?

Weeds are plants that grow where they are not wanted. They are plants in the wrong place. Many weeds such as Bathurst Burr are in the wrong place almost wherever they grow, but some weeds can be useful in certain circumstances. Radiata pine is a useful plantation tree but a weed in bushland.

2. Where do weeds come from?

Most of Australia's weeds come from places with similar climates such as Europe, South America, South Africa, North America, Asia and New Zealand. An increasing number of weeds are Australian natives that grow outside their natural range.

3. How do weeds get here?

Weeds can hitchhike on camping equipment, bags, shoes and clothing, in food and grain, on cars, machines and animals; they may also be brought here deliberately as ornamental plants or for their commercial value.

4. Why do weeds go weedy?

Many weeds are good competitors for light, water, nutrients and space. They grow quickly and reproduce rapidly. Often people help weeds grow by creating conditions that favour them in natural areas and on farms. Many weeds also have protective features such as thorns, spines and poisons which browsing animals sometimes know to avoid. Most weeds are also free of natural predators or parasites in the new areas they invade.

5. How do weeds impact on the environment, the economy and people?

Weeds can:

- change, take over or destroy natural ecosystems and farmlands,
- degrade recreational areas in bush, rivers and lakes,
- reduce the productivity or profitability of agriculture,
- cause health problems such as poisoning and allergies to people, production animals and pets,
- increase costs to the farmers and graziers who produce our food, or
- increase (weed control and other) costs to local government, which are passed on to ratepayers.

