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## The Grapevine

By Maryann Whitman

### Something Extraordinary

This following simple recipe for killing weeds is being presented in prose form because I'd like you to read the entire text to make sure you get the rest of the story.

This recipe goes as follows: 1 gallon white vinegar; 1 pound table salt; 1 tablespoon liquid dish-washing soap. Mix together and pour into a small spray bottle. It's great for killing weeds in walkways, around trees, etc., but do not get the concoction on anything you do not want to kill because it's potent. The mixture lasts for several months; store extra in a separate container such as a gallon milk jug.

Even though these are all everyday kitchen items, let's pause and ponder.

The salt and the vinegar (a mild acid) are the stressors, (something that interferes with normal cell function) or, ultimately, the killers of the cells they contact. Used carefully and in small quantities, these chemicals will probably break down quickly in the soil. Used in large quantities, both would likely stay in the soil for at least a couple of rains before they were diluted or washed away. The soap is the surfactant; it disrupts the cell walls of plants. The surfactant (any chemical that acts to reduce the surface tension of water) helps the salt and vinegar to get to the plant parts they can affect. Regular dish soap can contain antibiotics, perfumes, and dyes, among other caustic chemicals. Hikers and wilderness campers avoid all commercial soaps; they use Dr. Bronner's soap and keep even that away from open waters, as it can do damage to wildlife.

Any one of the ingredients would be deadly or at least life-threatening to any worms, frogs, or soil microorganisms.

If a person were to ingest a quantity of this mixture he or she could get sick.

One would be wise to avoid getting sprayed in the face with this fluid, as it would likely burn one's eyes.

You will probably need to "kill" the same plant again and again, because this treatment likely only kills the top growth, not the roots; it is not a systemic herbicide.

Even though the recipe is made up of everyday kitchen items, because the quantities and concentrations are significantly different from those one would normally use, the items suddenly become something extraordinary. They are no longer just salt and vinegar and soap; they have become a herbicide because that's how you're using it. As with any pesticide, you should wear gloves and eye protection when working with this recipe, because this surely is a pesticide – just like some one might find on a garden center shelf.

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### For the Birds

I've always wanted to participate in a bird count, but have always been at a loss as to what numbers one should pay attention to and report. If single chickadees are at the feeder all day long, one can surmise that it's likely more than just one bird – but how many more than one? If five chickadees are visible at one time, leave, and are replaced by three, does that make eight? What if a hawk soars over the area, seemingly appraising the fare – does he count? What if a hawk zooms through the feeding area but doesn't make a kill – does he count? What if the male and the female of the species never feed at the same time – is that two birds or one? What about the skein of Canada Geese that flies overhead?

Cornell Ornithology Labs in upstate New York have put together a "puzzled person's" guide to doing a bird count:

- Register the largest number of the same species that are visible at your feeder at any one time, whether they are feeding or just hanging around the feeder;
- If male and female of a species feed at separate times they count as one bird – because you only ever record the actual number of a given species that appear at one time;

- Both hawks count because they were attracted by whatever is attracted to the feeder;
- The Geese are not involved with your feeder, don't count them. But then – it all depends on the goals of the bird count. The British are currently regretting not having included house sparrows in their bird counts during the 1960s and 1970s because they were so numerous. Now that the sparrows' numbers are decreasing they have no history to record the process.

Go to these web sites for more details: [www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/InstruxandUpdates/Count\\_birds.htm](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/InstruxandUpdates/Count_birds.htm) and [www.birdsource.org/gbbc](http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc).

### Chapter Activity

This from Portia Brown, Louisville (KY) Chapter: Indian summer may be past, but Indian grass harvest is in high gear! Before the 10th of November, I need to clear the Indian grass plumes off a large field. They make beautiful bouquets, and helpers are welcome to bouquets or some seed. We'll have some beverages and fruit on hand to keep us energized in the cooler weather that is forecast for the next few days. We'll also set aside some bouquets for decorations at our Wild Ones Thanksgiving potluck dinner. Bursting harvest abounds. Plenty to go all around. What a great way to spend a fall day!

Maryann is Editor of the Wild Ones Journal, and comes to the position with an extensive background in environmental matters of all kinds.