

BOOK REVIEW:

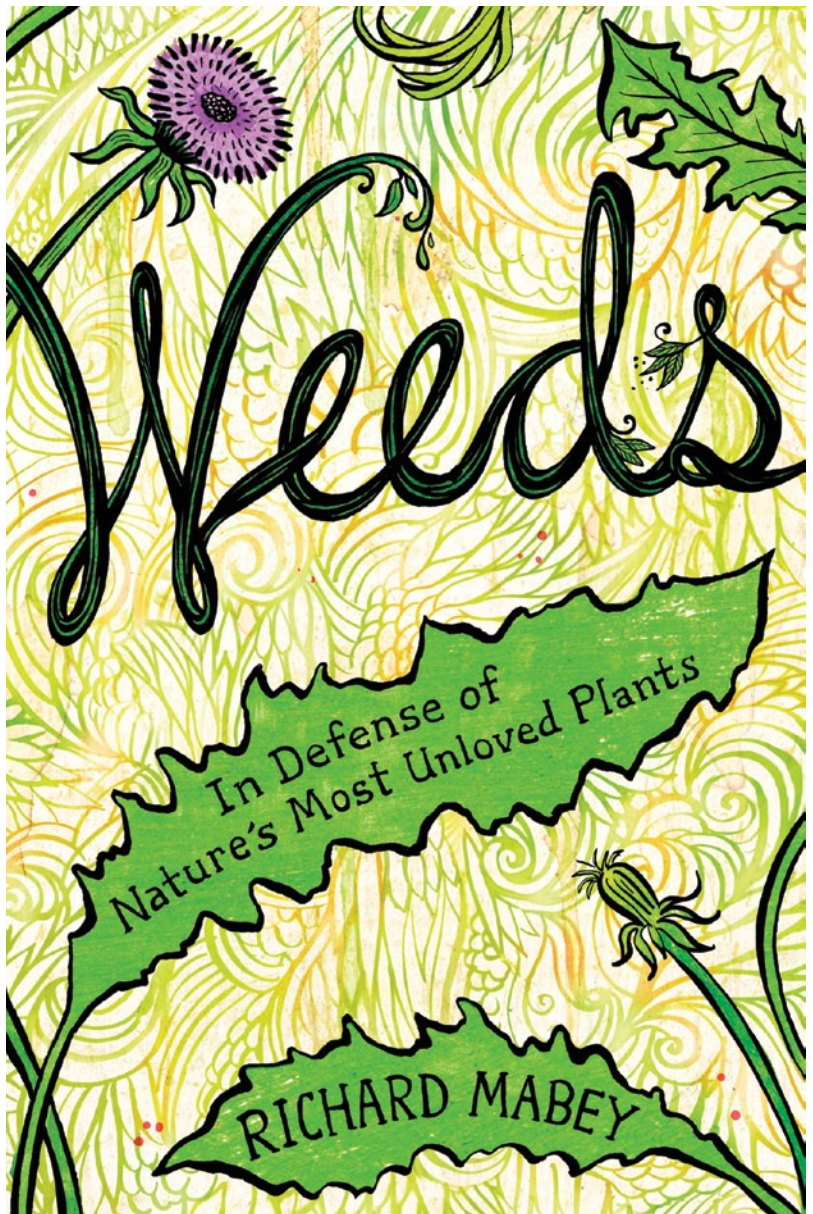
Weeds: In Defense of Nature's Most Unloved Plants

Peter Del Tredici

Weeds: In Defense of Nature's Most Unloved Plants
Richard Mabey. Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.
324 pp. 2010
(United States publication 2011)
ISBN 978-0-06-206545-2

In his new book *Weeds: In Defense of Nature's Most Unloved Plants*, Richard Mabey presents a refreshingly non-judgmental look at some of the most vilified plants on earth. While acknowledging the problems that some of these notorious plants can cause for both gardeners and ecosystems, he also presents their not insubstantial positive contributions in terms of recolonizing derelict land in cities, restoring war-ravaged landscapes in Europe, and, over the millennia, providing abundant food and medicine for people. In short, the author takes a balanced approach to the subject of weeds and he puts the focus where it belongs—on their intimate association with human culture going back to the dawn of agriculture itself.

As Mabey presents it, the subject of weeds is nothing less than a microcosm of human culture, an observation that he reinforces with numerous quotations from famous writers including Shakespeare, Ruskin, and Thoreau, and, of course, from the Bible. Not stopping here, he also provides a lengthy discussion of the significance of weeds in visual arts, as



exemplified by a discourse on the significance of Albrecht Dürer's famous painting from 1503, *Large Piece of Turf*, which he describes as, "... not only the first portrait of a community of weeds, it is the first truly naturalistic flower-painting in Europe, and the herald of a new humanistic attitude towards nature."

A more modern example is his discussion of the science fiction classic *The Day of the Triffids* (first published as a book in 1951 and released in 1962 as a movie, now a cult favorite), which Mabey presents as a metaphor for



Great Piece of Turf (also known as *Large Piece of Turf*), 1503, by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna, Austria/The Bridgeman Art Library.

aggressive invasive species such as giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*) and kudzu (*Pueraria montana*). It should also be noted that the book is up-to-date in its discussion of the modern, scientific data on weeds, discussing in detail how the increased use of herbicides over the past fifty years has influenced weeds' evolution, and how genetically modified (GM) crops are interacting with weeds to make them hardier and more difficult to eradicate. In short, Mabey masterfully weaves the disparate fibers that constitute the cultural and natural history of weeds into a colorful tapestry of a book that few nature writers can match.

Weeds: In Defense of Nature's Most Unloved Plants is not without a few flaws however, one of which (for American readers) is its exclusive use of the British common names of plants throughout the text. There is a glossary at the end which provides the Latin equivalent to the common name, but the fact that many of the plants discussed in the book have different common names in North America than they do in England leaves the inquisitive American reader who doesn't know the Latin names of plants with little choice but to turn to the internet or reference books to figure out identities. In addition, the book is overwhelmingly focused on weeds that dominate the landscapes of the British Isles and on British writing on the subject, making the book somewhat less relevant to North American audiences than it perhaps needs to be. Certainly the history and behavior of North American weeds is discussed in the book, particularly the subject of their early introduction from Europe, but their treatment is minimal compared to the space devoted to weeds in Britain. There's also a surprising absence of any mention of the extensive pioneering German literature on the subject of urban ecology, particularly that done by Herbert Sukopp and his colleagues in post-war Berlin.

Despite the British focus of *Weeds: In Defense of Nature's Most Unloved Plants*, I found it a fascinating read—which is no small accomplishment given the fact that I have a large library of well-studied weed books at home. Mabey is an engaging writer with long-standing, highly personal interest in weeds that shines through on



NANCY ROSE

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*).

every page. He deserves kudos for his masterful integration of the scientific and cultural aspects of weed ecology and his fluid, often poetic, use of language. Here he describes watching weeds grow at an active construction site:

“When I look at their comings and goings, as hectic as the movements of the bulldozers, I grope for metaphors to understand their meaning. I think of ants, but they're too organized, too determinedly earth-changing, like the excavating machinery itself. Then it occurs to me that they are like a kind of immune system, organisms which move in to repair damaged tissue, in this case earth stripped of its previous vegetation.”

While this book has something for everyone, I suspect that its greatest appeal will not be to down-in-the-dirt gardeners but to those of the armchair persuasion who like their weeds with a touch of literature, humor, and taste.

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