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*Cobalt. Eastern bracken, horsetail, vetch.

*Copper. Coltsfoot, dandelion, eastern bracken, plantain, purslane, silverweed, sow thistle, stinging nettle, vetch.

*Fluorine. Garlic, watercress.

*Iodine. Bladderwrack, burdock, Canada thistle, coltsfoot, creeping thistle, dandelion, devil’s-bit, dock, eastern bracken, nodding thistle, plantain, redroot pigweed, Russian thistle, stinging nettle, toadflax, watercress.


*Manganese. Chickweed, eastern bracken, lamb’s-quarters.

*Nitrogen. Cattail, lamb’s-quarters, stinging nettle.

*Phosphorus. Chickweed, clover, dandelion, dock, eastern bracken, garden sorrel, garlic, German chamomile, lamb’s-quarters, purslane, redroot pigweed, sheep sorrel, vetch, watercress.

*Potassium. Chickweed, chicory, coltsfoot, corn chamomile, creeping thistle, dandelion, dock, eastern bracken, German chamomile, lamb’s-quarters, plantain, redroot pigweed, silverweed, sow thistle, stinging nettle, tansy, vetch, watercress.

*Silica. Dandelion, horsetail, plantain, valerian.

*Sodium. Dandelion, garden sorrel, sheep sorrel, stinging nettle, shepherd’s-purse, watercress.

*Sulfur. Coltsfoot, garlic, plantain, shepherd’s-purse, stinging nettle, watercress.

Before looking to your weeds as divining rods, remember that, in Kourik’s words, “one individual plant says nothing.” Others who have studied weeds and their relationships to the soil echo his observation that individual plants can grow in atypical situations and many species tolerate a wide range of soil conditions. If your weeds are sickly and undersized, they’re probably not growing in a favorable habitat.

But healthy, lush plant communities—more than one plant of a single species along with other indicator plants—may be a useful signal of soil type, Kourik says. “It’s pretty clear when you see a good stand of dock that the area gets flooded during the year,” he says. “Basically, if you’ve got dock, don’t plant your vegetables there.” But weeds, he added, “can’t replace a soil test.”