Scotch Broom

For many people, yellow signifies happiness, optimism, hope, sunshine, and summer. Soon Mason County will be ablaze with yellow. Happy? Optimistic? Maybe not if you are confronted with a wave of blooming Scotch broom.

Scotch broom is a vigorous, perennial shrub, with a tap root, green stems, small evergreen leaves, and bright yellow, pea-like flowers. The shrubs can grow to 10 feet tall and live up to 30 years, with an average life of 10-15 years. It blooms March to April and when the seed pods are mature, the two halves twist and audibly split apart, ejecting the seeds a short distance from the parent plant. Shrubs produce an average of 9,650 seeds per year which can remain viable in the soil for up to 80 years. Scotch broom seeds are commonly dispersed by people, being transported on shoes and vehicle tires as well as being moved in seed-contaminated soils and gravels.

Herbarium records document the introduction of Scotch broom into Washington from Europe beginning in the 1800’s and it was considered widespread by the 1930’s. It was listed as a Washington State Class B Noxious Weed in 1988 and, not surprisingly, it is one of the most common weeds in our region today. Because Scotch broom is so pervasive in Mason County, it is not targeted for control here under Washington State Weed Laws. Class A or B-Designate Noxious Weeds are our highest priority for control. These noxious weeds, often uncommon, and unknown to most except plant enthusiasts, are the plants that we don’t want to become the next Scotch broom or Himalayan blackberry in 100 years.

The one consolation with this annoying species is that small plants can be hand-pulled creating less soil disturbance than removing the root system of large plants. Weed puller tools, which leverage larger plants out of the ground, are available to borrow at the WSU Mason County Extension office at no cost to property owners.

If only cutting/mowing is possible, maximize damage and possible death to the plants by cutting when they are drought stressed, typically late summer to early fall. Cutting plants to the ground minimizes soil disturbance which may result in seed germination from the seedbank. Planting or seeding desired plants to areas where Scotch broom has been removed is important to provide competition and diversity.

Within Mason County, county, city, and state crews, community groups, volunteers, and private landowners are working to control Scotch broom. This is an encouraging trend and maybe we can hope for a time when this plant is much less dominant in our County. If you, or anyone you know, would like information on removing Scotch broom, please contact our office.

Remember that Scotch broom is evergreen, which means it’s always growing and always available for controlling. Let’s welcome spring to Mason County with yellow daffodils, forsythia, and woodland violets and send Scotch broom packing.
Patricia Grover is the Coordinator for the Mason County Noxious Weed Control Board. She can be reached at patriciag@co.mason.wa.us or (360)427-9670X592.