

Weeds in the News 2012 Myrtle Spurte

By Robin Kusske

Myrtle Spurge (*Euphorbia myrsinites*)



Image courtesy of Sue Winterowd, Stevens County Noxious Weed Control Board

Native to Eastern Europe and Western Asia, Myrtle spurge is a Class B noxious weed in Washington State. An escaped ornamental, it is a highly invasive ornamental plant that is popular in xeriscapes and rock gardens. A low-growing succulent, Myrtle spurge usually grows 6 inches tall with stout trailing 1 foot long stems that have clasping spirally arranged blunt blue-gray leaves. The stems, radiating from the center of the plant, rise up at the tips from which the terminally borne flowers emerge in late winter to early spring. The flowers and their subtending bracts are initially greenish-yellow flowers but deepen to a red hue by summer. This hardy plant is tolerant of very cold winter temperatures, summer heat and little irrigation but requires good draining soils.

Myrtle spurge projects its seeds, spreading them as far as 15 feet around the parent plant. Seeds can be ejected when plants are disturbed, sticking to wildlife hair and enabling transport far from the parent plants. Seeds can survive in soil for up to 8 years. Roots fragmented by cultivation can produce new plants as

well. This plant prefers well-drained dry to moist soils with partial shade to full sun.

Myrtle spurge is toxic. The active ingredient in Spurges are terpen esters. One such terpen ester is resiniferatoxin, which is 10,000 to 100,000 times more irritating than capsaicin, the substance that makes chili peppers taste hot. Some terpen esters are also known to be carcinogenic.

Myrtle spurge sap can cause nausea, vomiting and diarrhea if ingested. Skin contact may include severe blistering and burns, rashes, severe skin irritation and dermatitis. Myrtle spurge has been known to cause anaphylactic shock reactions in sensitive individuals. The sap can cause large painful eruptions on the surface of eyeballs and can result in blindness. All parts of the plant are toxic. The most common victims of myrtle spurge toxicity are children.

Roundup will control Myrtle spurge, but repeated applications will be necessary till the seed bank is depleted. Hand pulling is also an effective method, though extreme caution should be taken. In order to gain control over a population it must be pulled over multiple years. Pull plants early in the season prior to seed formation. Wear protective clothing, eye protection, and gloves when working with Myrtle spurge. Use caution when pulling to not get any sap on your skin, especially on the face or in the eyes. If sap contacts skin make sure to wash that area immediately.

Intensive cultivation and the planting of competitive crops are useful methods for the control of myrtle spurge in fields. For heavy infestations on rangeland, the addition of chemicals, grazing sheep or goats is usually necessary to further diminish weed growth.

Alternatives to planting Myrtle spurge include Sun Rose (*Helianthemum* ssp. and cultivars), Cape Blanco or Purple Stonecrop (*Sedum spathulifolium* 'Cape Blanco', 'Purpureum'), and Sulfur flower (*Erogonum umbellatum*).

For more information on Myrtle spurge contact the Franklin County Noxious Weed Control Board or visit the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board website at <http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/default.asp>.