

Get Rid of Non-Native Blackberries

By Valerie Jean Rose

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Goats feast on invasive blackberries!

When I was asked to write about removing Himalayan and Evergreen blackberries, I smiled. Oh, those unfortunate people who have to tackle these supercharged invasives! Fearfully watching the rampant growth, they try to fend off the monstrous invasion of greenery. It's poignant to see old buildings slowly devoured by these vigorous vines. How sad that some gardeners must struggle with this obnoxious intruder.

Then I began clearing an area, preparing to install rain barrels from the Skagit PUD. I noticed one thick, spiny cane among the dainty raspberry plants, at least 4 times thicker than the others – OH NO! IT'S THE INVASION OF THE HIMALAYAN BLACKBERRY, here in my little Mount Vernon yard! Now it's personal.

Native, Himalayan and Evergreen Blackberries

The native blackberry (*Rubus ursinus*) has slender canes that politely spread across the ground unless supported by a shrub, boulder or fence. The Himalaya (*Rubus armeniacus*) and Evergreen (*Rubus acinatus*) blackberries are actually European immigrants. Evergreen blackberries have lacier, deeply serrated leaves. Both have tall upright canes armed with heavy, curved thorns. Unchecked, the plants can grow into nearly impenetrable thickets. Only one creature seems undaunted by a thorny wall of blackberries – but we'll get to the goats in a moment.

Blackberry canes are biennial: in year one they only bear leaves, and next year bear white flowers and delicious fruit. Like most invasives, blackberries have many reproductive strategies, including suckers (new canes sprouting from the roots) and stem tips (when the tips contact soil, they often root!) Birds eat the tasty fruit, distributing the seeds pre-wrapped in fertilizer. The seeds remain viable in the soil for several years. What an unfair advantage!

Patience, sweat and composting

With only a few gnarly canes to deal with, I've successfully used loppers to cut the canes to the ground, and a sturdy garden fork to dig out the spidery roots. It all went into the big green Yard Waste recycle bin. Craig Culmbach, at Skagit Soils, says their composting system will neutralize such hardy invasives. Most home composting systems rarely reach the 140 – 160 degree F temperatures achieved by this commercial system, which is necessary for killing seeds and pathogens.

The canes and roots will also be chopped, along with more benign clippings, ending the blackberries' determined career. If I composted them at home, the seeds could find their way back into the garden, and the canes could root if they touch the ground. Who wants to grapple with these thorny monsters, anyway?

Leave it to the goats

Goats actually enjoy stomping around in blackberry patches, gobbling leaves and shoots. When the Nature Conservancy wanted to remove five acres of dense blackberry thicket along the Skagit River, they hired a unique workforce. 30 goats from Akyla Farm munched their way through the thorny thickets, flattening tall canes for easy removal by rake. Carol Osterman, co-owner of Akyla Farm near La Conner, says the herd also happily eats other difficult weeds like Canada and bull thistles. “When they strip the leaves, the roots starve. I fence one small area at a time, and let the goats work. When they’ve cleared that area, I move the fence and the herd. They’re very efficient.”



A goat from Akyla Farms devours tasty blackberry leaves Monday, Aug. 2, on property off Cape Horn Road near Birdsvie. Owner Carol Osterman said her goats seem to know which plants to choose and have no qualms about consuming nettles and thistles. **Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald**



Carol Osterman of Akyla Farms directs her goats on Monday toward a blackberry patch on property off Cape Horn Road near Birdsvie. Osterman said her goats have no qualms about eating nettles and thistles, as well as blackberry canes. **Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald**

Unfortunately goats aren’t allowed within Mount Vernon city limits – but my blackberry problem doesn’t really merit the Akyla Farm team. Osterman says her goats generally work in areas as small as 300 feet by 200 feet, but she is happy to assess any blackberry thicket, and discuss removal options with landowners.

Tools and Timing

The San Juan County Noxious Weed Control Program recognizes that different sites may require different methods. Here are some highlights from their publication on blackberry control:

Blackberry removal is best done from late June through September when most of the plant’s energy is devoted to flowering and fruiting. During the winter and spring the thickets provide protective cover for birds and small mammals, so don’t disturb them during those seasons.

Mechanical Control:

- **Pulling:** uproot 1st year and shade-suppressed weaker plants, when soil is moist and loose. Firmly grab the stem near its base (or use a weed wrench) to extract the crowns.

- **Hand digging:** Use a claw mattock to loosen the dirt around the plant's roots before pulling them out.
- **Backhoe:** Dig out the root crowns and major roots using a backhoe with mechanical thumb or claw.
- **Cutting:** Use a mower, brush cutter, machete, or loppers to repeatedly cut the above ground vegetation.

Biological controls:

- **Grazing:** Goats can achieve and maintain blackberry control. Sheep also graze blackberries, but less effectively.



Two-year and older Himalyan and Evergreen blackberry canes bear numerous white to pinkish flowers and edible fruit. **Photo courtesy of The Nature Conservancy**

Chemical treatment:

- Avoid using chemical control when soil is dry or plants are stressed. Instead, systemic herbicide application is most effective when the soil is moist and in early spring, when carbohydrates move from crown to buds, or in the fall when movement is from leaves to the crown.
- **Root crown cut stump treatment-** In late spring, or early fall, apply glyphosate directly to the cambial area around the edges of freshly cut stumps. These applications should be made within 10 minutes of cutting to ensure effectiveness.
- **Spot spray-** In mid-summer cut the plant. Then allow it to resprout to about 18 inches. In late September through early November, apply triclopyr and/or glyphosate to the **fully leafed** new growth. Spot-spraying is less effective when plants are drought stressed or have not fully leafed out.

Remember, everything we apply to our gardens ends up in the groundwater, and eventually into the Salish Sea. Some surfactants (chemicals that help herbicides stick to leaves) are harmful to fish and other aquatic creatures. There is no instant solution to invasive blackberries. With any method you use, infested areas will require follow-up management for several years to prevent plants from re-growing from seeds. So make your blackberry control choices with care, creativity, patience – and maybe goats.

RESOURCES

- Himalayan and Evergreen Blackberries, San Juan County Noxious Weed Control Program;
<http://sanjuan.wsu.edu/noxious/documents/BlackberryControl1508.pdf>
- ‘Gobbling Goats’ article and video, The Nature Conservancy;
www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/washington/misc/art26013.html
- Managing Himalayan Blackberry in Western Oregon Riparian Areas;
<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pdf/em/em8894.pdf>
- Integrated Pest Management Prescription: Himalayan Blackberry, Thurston Co. Public Health, Environmental Health Division;
www.co.cowlitz.wa.us/noxiousweeds/download_documents/County_documents/blackberry_Thurs.pdf
- Skagit Soils; grinder, composting process; kills pathogens & weed seeds;
craig@skagitsoils.com