

Unwelcome Guests

By Virgene Link-New
May 12, 2017



Skagit County not immune to invasive species

What comes to your mind when you think of invasive species? Maybe you think of pythons in the Everglades or of zebra mussels in the Great Lakes. Then, too, there is the emerald ash borer that has killed 17 million trees in 15 states. Or, perhaps you think of horsetail, which is a native species to the Northwest, but aggressive because it may easily and readily overtake our gardens if we are not vigilant.

Examples of invasive species with which we must concern ourselves in Skagit County include nutria (a South American rodent also known as river rat or coypu) in our sloughs and drainage ditches. They damage crops and acreage, damage dikes and levees, and destroy habitat for native species in wetlands. They have not been completely eradicated from the county according to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Poison hemlock is a big concern. Poison hemlock is not related to the evergreen hemlock tree but was imported as a garden flower in the 1800s from Europe. It is the “hemlock” that was used as poison for Socrates’ death and appears throughout the county, going unrecognized and allowed to flourish.

Poison hemlock is highly dangerous and acutely toxic to people and animals. All parts of the plant are poisonous and the stalks remain so for up to three years. Sunny areas seem to produce more toxins in the plant than shady areas. Wear gloves when handling it. Remove all parts of the plant and place in the trash. Do not compost it, burn it or leave it where it can be accessed. Eating the plant is most dangerous, but skin contact and respiratory toxicity are also possible. Please learn to recognize this plant and do your part to remove it from our county, even if it is on the “other side of the fence.” It readily spreads if allowed to go to seed. Strangely, it is classified only as a “Class B” weed in Washington State. Action against Class B weeds is recommended, but not required.

An example of an invasive insect species is the spotted wing drosophila (SWD). This pest of soft fruits arrived in Washington State in 2009. It is one of the vinegar flies, but unlike other fruit flies, the female can lay her eggs in unripened fruit still on the vine. It is a pest of blueberry, raspberry, strawberry, grapes, cherries, peaches and other soft fruits. The fruit fly that is a nuisance around your bananas on the counter is a different species (same Genus).

SWD eggs hatch and the larvae (maggots) can begin feeding before the fruit is picked. Unfortunately, they can have many generations during the year. Our non-native Himalayan blackberry and native snowberry, salmonberry and others can be a host to this serious pest. Homemade vinegar traps can be placed in your growing area.



Poison hemlock is highly dangerous and toxic to people and animals. All parts of the plant are poisonous.
Photo by Virgene Link-New / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

Washington State University Fact Sheet 049E explains how to make and place vinegar traps. After about a week, bring the contents of your trap to our Master Gardener Plant Clinic; and we will help you evaluate your “catch”. If you have damaged fruit, we can check that for you, too.

The brown marmorated stink bug is another comparatively new arrival to Washington State in 2010. It has migrated as far north as Snohomish County on the West side. It may be in Skagit County soon, if not already. Hundreds have been captured in Yakima and Walla Walla. This stink bug is different from our other stink bugs, although many of them are brown. As its numbers build, it is a very serious crop pest. It specializes in fruit tree crops, but will also attack hops and hundreds of other crops including vegetables and nuts. They particularly like anything with sap.

Our other stink bugs do not swell to the numbers this invasive pest does, nor do they make your home a winter haven. These unwelcome arrivals from Asia usually invade as hitchhikers brought in by humans, arriving as vehicle occupants, in boxes or planters. Many stink bugs are beneficial in that they prey on other insects, so it is important to correctly identify this pest.



Japanese knotweed's invasive root system and strong growth can damage foundations, buildings, roads and more. *Photo by Virgene Link-New / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

These hitchhiker capabilities also apply to the dreaded Japanese beetle now found in Washington County, Oregon. Let's hope the tomato "ebola" of Africa, which is actually a moth larvae does not find its way here.

There are insect predators such as wasps that attack the invasive bugs or eat their eggs. Once again you may take a questionable bug to your Extension Office for help with identification.

Prevention of problems is cheaper than trying to fix it later. We have found this to be true with our non-native scotch broom, Himalayan blackberry and spotted wing drosophila. We are stewards for a sustainable planet, and we need to do our part in protecting our local environment and agriculture.

RESOURCES:

- Skagitnutria.com
- Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Mill Creek Office
- Extension.wsu.edu/sanjuan/wp-content/poison-hemlock-brochure
- www.kingcounty.gov/services/environment/animalsandplants/poisonhemlock
- www.skagitcounty.net/Departments/noxiousweeds/weedchart.htm
- wsu.extension.edu/fact-sheet-FS049E
- <https://news.wsu.edu/2016/10/18/stink-bugs-invade-counties-homes-Washington>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/24/tomato-ebola-nigeria-moths-staple-food-crops>