

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener

Date: Nov. 13, 2005

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Herb Robert, scientific name: *Geranium robertianum* excites a wide range of emotions, from love to hate, in plant enthusiasts. For example: In Indiana Herb Robert is designated “threatened” (to be nurtured and protected), whereas in Washington, Herb Robert is definitely not threatened. However it does threaten our own native plant ecosystems, particularly in wooded areas. Here, Herb Robert’s aggressive habit of annexing territory has earned it Class B weed status on the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board’s Noxious Weed List. Class B weed designation means that Herb Robert, by law, must be controlled where not already widespread. However, control where it *has* already become widespread is up to local jurisdictions. A copy of state and federal noxious weed lists are available from your local Noxious Weed Board or website: <https://www.nwcb.wa.gov/>

The Plant

Reddish hairy stems that radiate, spider-like, from a single crown, is the first pattern clue that Herb Robert might be lurking among the pretty carpet of green in your garden, on your land, or along hiking trails or in forest underbrush in public parks. Bright green leaves of Herb Robert are deeply dissected and, in direct sun, can turn red. In late spring, diminutive and cheerful hot pink five petal flowers give this plant away. These flowers then develop into hairy brown seed heads with typical geranium crane’s bill shape. A cutaway drawing of an Herb Robert seed head in *Flora of the Pacific Northwest* by Hitchcock and Cronquist, reveals contents of two carpels of a 5 carpel seed head, each carpel holding up to 10 seeds, thus giving a single flower the power to bear 50 seeds! When seeds are ripe, or the plant disturbed, seed heads pop open projecting seeds out several feet (at least 1 meter) in all directions like uncovered popcorn. When you consider that this plant blooms from May through October (or even into December in a mild winter), and sports many flowers on one plant simultaneously, Herb Robert’s strategy of reproductive success becomes clear: to carpet-bomb all soil around the plant!

One can also identify Herb Robert by a repellant chemical smell, often described as “musky” or “mousy,” a truly a “scented” geranium. According to Arthur Lee Jacobson, (<http://www.arthurleej.com/a-herbrobert.html>). Herb Robert is not toxic (though allergic reactions to this plant can’t be ruled out). However, the smell alone would discourage munching by man or beast. Because Herb Robert has become naturalized everywhere on the planet except in the coldest, hottest, driest, most anoxic and otherwise inhospitable places, its point of origin is difficult to determine. What is known is:

- Herb Robert prefers woodland shade and moisture, but tolerates dry, sunny spots as well
- Herb Robert thrives in artificial and disturbed sites, but likes undisturbed sites too.

In short, it is easy to please.

Herb Robert is annual, but in some situations, like late summer seed sprouting, acts as biennial. It can also be a short-lived perennial in warmer regions.

The Love

In 1992, a collection of U.S. Commemorative Stamps was issued to honor 50 American

wildflowers, among them Herb Robert. The accompanying book issued with the stamps, *Wildflowers: A Collection of U.S. Commemorative Stamps*, even singles out, of all 50 beauty contestants, Herb Robert in attractive display, its peppermint candy flowers glowing against muted background, for cover photo!

In England people regard Herb Robert fondly as hedgerow groundcover and consider it native. Its delicate pink flowers have even inspired English poets to sing its praises:

Herb Robert & the Fairy Folk

"Sweet maids of honor, woodland elves!

Frail flowers that arrive with the cuckoo,

Pale lilac, hyacinth purple of hue,

And the little pink geranium,

All smil'd & nodded to see me come."

-Roden Berkeley Wriothsley Noel

(1834-1894)

English folklore associates Herb Robert with other-worldly creatures like mischievous house goblins, little folk or fairies, both good and bad, and even Robin Hood himself. Legends and smell have earned the beguiling geranium names like Stinking Robert, Stinky Bob, Stinking Jenny, Fox (from "folks") Geranium, Dragon's Blood, and Death-Come-Quickly. See http://www.paghat.com/cranesbill_robust.html for other threads Herb Robert has woven into fabric of English culture.

According to Lewis J. Clark's *Wildflowers of the Pacific Northwest*, the plant was named after Saint Robert of Moleme for its blooming on the Day of All Saints, which, at that time, may have been celebrated May 1. Others say a healer, named Rupert (changed to Robert), may have found it useful for things like rubbing one's skin with its leaves to repel insects (and your friends, your spouse, your kids, your boss, and even your dog). Don't try this at home!

The Hate

Like the commemorative stamp book of 1992, Washington State's Noxious Weed List web site also features the photogenic Herb Robert as heading logo.

In an effort to beautify one's shade garden of Pacific Northwest maritime zones (*Sunset Western Garden Book*, zones 4 and 5), many a hapless gardener, charmed by Herb Robert's delicate peppermint-candy pink flowers and fernlike foliage, has taken home slips of it from admired gardens of neighbors and/or friends, only to discover that, within a year or two, this self effacing, lacey little time bomb not only has gobbled the whole bed in which lovingly planted, but has scampered on into neighboring beds and neighbors' yards, leaping lawns, scrambling up and down retaining walls and establishing footholds in the most hard to reach places. Attempts then to eradicate now unwelcome guest quickly drive said hapless gardener to distraction as abundant seeds, now already in soil, seize opportunity in openings of pulled comrades to sprout. Herb Robert then quickly becomes a spidery thicket, but this thicket stinks!

The Problem

Difficult as it is to control in a garden, control of Herb Robert becomes almost impossible

in our native Pacific Northwest woodlands. Once a single plant arrives, whether by deer hoof, bird dropping, wheeled vehicles or hiker's boot, it can produce its peppermint candy blooms from May through October, in mild winters, even December! Pollinators of all kinds love the flowers, which under ultra-violet light (see [www. Naturfotograf.com/UV_GERA_ROB.html](http://www.Naturfotograf.com/UV_GERA_ROB.html)), glow like ruby-red and white neon signs that do everything but flash. If, however, pollinators do happen to miss a flower—no problem, these “wall flowers” can self-fertilize!

The stink of “Stinky Bob” appears to discourage plants other than Stinky Bobs from thriving in its vicinity. Thus results Stinky Bob monoculture. Examples of Herb Robert's incursions and monocultures can now be seen in many of our most treasured places in the Pacific Northwest. For instance, Multnomah Falls Park in Oregon, where Herb Robert gardens greet visitors hiking up to the falls. Sites hosting Herb Robert specific to Skagit and Whatcom Counties along Highway 20 are: Rockport State Park, Rasar State Park, Ladder Creek Falls and Rock Gardens behind Gorge Dam, North Cascades National Park, your neighbor's yard, and yours too, if you don't watch out.

Complicating things is Herb Robert's likeness to our native Bleeding Heart (*Dicentra Formosa*). Both have pink flowers, however Bleeding Heart's flowers are bell-shaped and dangle from stems in a sequence of blooms. Herb Robert's flowers bloom singly with five petals and face up. Because leaf shape is very similar, though, and flowers not always present, it is all too easy to mistake Bleeding Heart for Herb Robert and pull it out. When in doubt, sniff the first pulled plant at the base for unmistakable odor.

The Solution

Look for Herb Robert's first flowers of spring, in early May. It is relatively shallow rooted and individual plants; if they do not fracture at the crown, pull out easily. Stuff pulled weeds into a plastic bag, being careful to avoid dropping seeds from pregnant seed heads. Then toss the pulled Herb Robert, bag and all, into a garbage can destined for county solid waste transfer station. Often, however, by the time this weed is spotted, it has already infiltrated more extensively than it may appear at first sight. As one stoops to remove one Stinky Bob, even before rising, he/she will suddenly notice one or two more Stinky Bobs. When pulling them, six more appear among the bushes, or crawling up trunks of venerable old-growth conifers. Do not let this spoil your hiking trip. Better next time you go, to organize a weed-pulling party, and bring back conscripted friends, neighbors, and other willing weed warriors. Provision the party with tools, rain gear and refreshments. It is a good excuse for a social event!

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.