



## ***SPOTLIGHT ON... NOXIOUS WEEDS***

### **Oh, Those (Ob) Noxious Plants**

Ever have a house guest who just would not leave, and during their stay the situation only deteriorated? Noxious weeds are a lot like that, only worse. Noxious weeds are non- native plants that, once established, are highly destructive, invasive, competitive and difficult to control or eliminate. Some exotic plants arrived here by design because they looked lovely or solved a landscaping or agricultural issue. Others hitchhiked here by ship, train, wind, on animal fur, or poop from migrating birds.

The bad news is some noxious weeds can burn your skin on contact or poison humans and/or horses, cows, goats and other livestock. Others can rapidly take over native plant communities (reducing native wildlife populations), clog our waterways, or damage recreational opportunities. Still others significantly reduce crop yields or lower land values.

Chances are you or one of your neighbors might be harboring a foreign invader – on purpose (you bought it not knowing its „criminal“ history), it arrived by accident or you inherited it with the property. Some noxious weeds are still sold in the nursery trade. This issue of Shore Steward News helps everyone learn who the bad plants are and how to deal with them effectively, with a focus on the top three.



### **Why Control Weeds?**

In the U.S., introduced weeds are spreading and invading approximately 1.7 million acres of wildlife habitat every year. These species have been implicated in many of the natural resource problems the world faces today. It is noted that noxious weeds result in U.S. crop losses estimated at \$26 billion a year! In addition, introduced species are the second leading cause of reductions in biological diversity.

- ◆ **Noxious weeds can reduce slope stability.** Several weed types have shallow rooting systems that do not adequately replace soil holding property of the native trees and shrubs they have displaced. Prolific foliage can also hide signs that clue a landowner in to pending slope stability problems.

- ❖ **Noxious weeds harm water quality.** Infestations of aquatic weeds can alter ecosystems by shading out algae that's critical to the aquatic food web. These weeds can lower food productivity, pH, and dissolved oxygen. Purple loosestrife can clog waterways, increasing siltation and decreasing wetland water storage capacity.
- ❖ **Noxious weeds affect land use.** Infestations of some species can affect the use of property. For example, *Spartina* can ruin beachfront property by altering the fundamental hydro-geology of the intertidal zone. Gently sloping beaches are transformed into high *Spartina* meadows that drop off into deep water. These changes may eliminate activities, such as shellfish production.
- ❖ **Noxious weeds affect the economy.** Noxious weed infestations can have serious economic consequences. For example, Scotch broom interferes with the regeneration of Douglas-fir plantations. A recent study estimated that Scotch broom reduces Oregon's total personal income by about \$47 million. This is equivalent to 1,908 annual jobs lost to Oregon's economy due to the presence of this noxious weed.
- ❖ **Noxious weeds threaten recreational areas.** Noxious weeds harm lakes, rivers, tidelands, and parks. Some can choke out fishing areas and make swimming and boating unsafe.

## Ways to Remove Some Common Unwanted Guests

There are three main methods to control weeds: manually, chemically and biologically. Manual control means digging the plant out (roots and all) or cutting it down - by hand or with machinery. Chemical control means spraying or injecting the plant with a chemical to kill or control it. Biological control uses insects or plant diseases to kill or control the weed, or crowding out the weed by planting other plants, and creating shade if the weed needs sun to grow.

Prevention and early eradication are, by far, the best way to get rid of problem plants. To the non-weed specialist, there is a tendency to avoid taking action. However, the longer you wait to start a control program, the more expensive control becomes and the more damage the species causes. Below are some control tips for the most common culprits around here.



### **Himalayan Blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*)**

Himalayan blackberry hails from Europe. Originally introduced for fruit production, the exotic species are now naturalized and widespread throughout the Pacific NW.

They out-compete native vegetation and prevent native trees (that need sun) from germinating. Dense, solid-like thickets can also block larger wildlife's ability to get to water, food, shelter and safe travel routes.

Removing the top growth by mowing, cutting or grazing with goats will eventually kill blackberry IF done repeatedly for several years. Cutting stems followed by digging out root crowns is much more effective than cutting alone and is surprising easy to do. In flat areas, spreading cardboard and thick layers of tree chips (6 – 10") to repress growth of new canes once cut back. Blackberry can also be controlled with herbicides, but please follow product labels carefully. Different herbicides need to be used at different times and may pose different risks to you and the environment. Make sure to protect native and beneficial species while doing any control work. It's best to start in the least infested areas, and then move into the more heavily infested areas.

### **English Ivy (*Hedera helix*)**

This European evergreen vine is widespread in western Washington, both as an intentionally planted ornamental and as an invasive in woodlands and parks.

Planting English ivy is highly discouraged; using non-invasive alternatives is recommended. English ivy grows all year round, easily out-competes many other plants, and covers everything in its reach. Also, because ivy roots are shallow, thick mats of it covering hillsides can increase slope failure. When water runs under the ivy, entire mats of ivy and soil can slide downhill. On walls and fences, ivy rootlets work into the wood and mortar and can cause structural and aesthetic damage.



Physical control is most effective with ivy. Hand-pulling combined with loosening the soil with a shovel, pulaski or weeding fork will work on most ivy stands. Older plants with thick, woody stems and roots will require more effort to remove. Older stems also will not re-sprout as much so leaving some old roots behind is probably not a problem.

Control ivy growing up tree trunks by removing all vines from the lower trunk (as high as you can comfortably reach). Pry stems off with a large screw driver or forked garden tool. Remove the stems from ALL around the trunk. Cut large vines with an axe or pruning saw. Upper vines will then die (can take several months). Also remove ivy growing around the base of the tree.

After ivy is removed, add a thick layer of cardboard and / or mulch to reduce invasion by ivy seedlings (dropped by animals) and other weeds. For large areas, plant native or other desirable plants to help reduce erosion and long-term weed problems. Watch for and pull out ivy re-sprouts for the next year.

### **Scotch (or Scot's) Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*)**

This evergreen broom was introduced from Europe as an ornamental and for erosion control. It's highly aggressive, has very long-lived seeds (up to 60 years!), high seed production, and forms dense stands which reduce wildlife habitat. Because it can tolerate almost any soil, it hinders natural re-vegetation of many different areas, from dry fields to wetland edges, hillsides to roadsides. It is prohibited by law to transport, buy, sell or distribute plants or seeds into or within the state.



For small infestations, hand pulling (especially after it rains) or using a Weed Wrench works well. Chopping or mowing (best done in dry months) can also work. For larger areas, you can use goats, but they need to be kept away from desirable plants. Using herbicide works best on regrowth, so cut or mow weeds first and let them grow several inches before spraying. On larger trunks, apply herbicide to the cut area of the stump immediately.

To keep Scotch broom from re-establishing by seeds already in the soil, revegetate the area with native and other desirable plants to compete for sun, space and water, and then try not to disturb the area after you finish the control work.

## **Have More Questions?**

Washington's first weed law was passed in 1881 to fight the spread of Canada thistle, a weed that was accidentally brought by early settlers. In the late 1960s, the state legislature established the state's Noxious Weed Control Board, and authorized counties to establish County Weed Boards. Thirty-eight of Washington's 39 counties have such boards. Washington's weed program is based on prevention and early detection of noxious weed

problems. To learn more about noxious weed control, contact your Noxious Weed Control Board. Check the State Weed Board for great information sources: <http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/>.

Most noxious weeds can be disposed of at your Island County Transfer Station free of charge. Make sure they are bagged, to prevent spread of seeds, and do not mix them with other vegetation that is not a noxious weed. (In other words, don't mix them with your grass clippings, maple leaves, etc. if you want to dispose of for free. There is a charge for disposal of vegetation that is not a noxious weed.)

## Resources

Ivy OUT (Off Urban Trees), Washington Native Plant Society: <http://www.ivyout.org/>

Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board website:  
<http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/>

King County Noxious Weed Control Program website:  
<http://www.kingcounty.gov/environment/animalsAndPlants/noxious-weeds.aspx>

*This "Spotlight On" publication was originally a Shore Stewards Newsletter written by Donna Gleisner, WSU Snohomish County Extension, and Janet Stein, Program Coordinator, Island County Noxious Weeds Control Board, published in October 2012*



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