

# PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE

(*Lythrum salicaria* L.)



*Galerucella* spp. feeding on leaves

State Noxious Weed List: **Yes.**

Purple loosestrife, a beautiful garden plant with an aggressive nature, first was introduced into North America in the early 1800s. The plant was sold in North Dakota by its genus name, *Lythrum*, for at least 50 years. *Lythrum* plants were brought to North Dakota for flower gardens because of their striking color, ease of growth, winter hardiness and lack of insect or disease problems. The garden varieties of purple loosestrife were sold by many cultivar names, including Morden Pink, Dropmore Purple and Morden Gleam. These garden cultivars were thought to be sterile but now have been shown to cross-pollinate with the wild *Lythrum* type and sometimes with other *Lythrum* cultivars.

Identification and growth form:

Purple loosestrife is a rhizomatous perennial forb. Wild infestations are associated with moist or marshy sites. The stems are erect (1.5 to 8 or more feet tall) and four to six angled, and can be smooth or pubescent with few branches. Leaves are simple (0.75 to 4 inches long, 0.2 to 0.5 inch wide), entire, and can be opposite or whorled.

The most identifiable characteristic of purple loosestrife is the striking rose to purple flowers. The flowers are



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arranged on a spike, which can be a few inches to 3 feet long. Each flower has five to seven petals arising from a cylindrical green tube. The plant usually flowers from early July to mid-September in North Dakota. The seed capsule is two-celled and contains many very small seeds (1 millimeter long or less). The roots become thick and woody in mature plants. The aerial shoots die in the fall and new shoots arise the following spring from buds at the top of the root crown. Although the root crown expands and produces more shoots each year, the maximum growth of the root crown diameter is limited to about 20 inches.

Spread of purple loosestrife is primarily by seed, but the plant also can spread vegetatively from stem cuttings. Research at NDSU has shown that seed viability of purple loosestrife growing in North Dakota wetlands ranged from 50 percent to 100 percent. With approximately 2.7 million seeds produced per plant, purple loosestrife has the potential to spread rapidly once established in an area.

## Why is this plant a concern?

The most destructive impact of purple loosestrife invasions is on the ecology of aquatic sites. Purple loosestrife forms dense monotypic stands as it displaces native wetland plants. Under optimum conditions, a small, isolated group of purple loosestrife plants can spread to cover aquatic sites in just one growing season. When purple loosestrife replaces native vegetation, it also can displace wildlife. Waterfowl, especially ducks, avoid wetlands that have become dominated with purple loosestrife. In addition, overall waterfowl production decreases as suitable nesting habitat is eliminated. The plant's growth is generally too compact to offer cover, and cover may be as crucial to wildlife as food.

## How do I control this plant?

Several methods are available for purple loosestrife control, including mechanical, biological and chemical. The size and location of a specific infestation will determine the best control methods. In general, small infestations of a few plants can be controlled by digging, especially when plants are only a few years old. Larger infestations require treatment with herbicides and/or biological control agents.

**Chemical.** Herbicides can be used to control purple loosestrife in areas too large to be controlled by digging. Also, herbicides can be applied to individual plants selectively in landscape situations to prevent killing desirable plants. Infestations growing along streams or in marshy areas may require specialized equipment and application by trained professionals.

Glyphosate (various trade names) will provide good control of purple loosestrife when applied from July to early September. Many formulations of glyphosate are sold but only those labeled for aquatic use can be applied in or near water. Garlon (triclopyr) is a selective broadleaf herbicide that will not kill cattail or other desirable monocot species. Garlon will provide good to excellent purple loosestrife control when applied in the pre- to early flower or late-flower growth stages but should not be used in landscapes or flower beds because soil residual of the herbicide may prevent establishment of other horticultural plants. Milestone (aminopyralid) and Milestone VM (aminopyralid plus triclopyr) can be used in seasonally dry wetlands.

**Biological.** Three biocontrol insect species first were released in North Dakota in 1997. They are:

- Galerucella pusilla* — a leaf-feeding beetle
- Galerucella californiensis* — a leaf-feeding beetle
- Hylobius transversovittatus* — a root-mining weevil

Of these insects, the two *Galerucella* spp. leaf-feeding beetles have been most successful. These insects overwinter as adults and lay eggs in early June in North Dakota. The adults and especially the larvae feed on the leaves and flowers of purple loosestrife. Following several summers of heavy feeding, purple loosestrife infestations have been reduced greatly. However, since the largest infestations in North Dakota are in urban areas, mosquito control programs have kept these insects from becoming well established.