

Purple Loosestrife

Purple loosestrife— you see it when you're driving down the street and when you're going for a walk. Don't let its pretty purple flowers fool you. This plant is an invasive species that is quickly outgrowing many native wetland plants and is also compromising the habitat of native birds, reptiles, and some mammals. Without continuous effort to suppress this unwelcome plant, it will, without a doubt, completely take over our wetlands.

Origination

Native to almost all of Eurasia, with the center of its native range in Japan, purple loosestrife was introduced to North America in the early 1800s, most likely for ornamental and medicinal purposes. In most states, purple loosestrife is still sold as an ornamental plant, but due to the growing realization that purple loosestrife is destroying many native wetlands, some states such as Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois have made it illegal to sell, purchase, or distribute purple loosestrife.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, purple loosestrife now occurs in every U.S. state except Florida.

Habitat and Distribution

Purple loosestrife prefers wet soils or standing water. Loosestrife plants are typically found in poorly drained soils of road right-of-ways and trails, drainage ditches, culverts, lake shores, stream banks, and a variety of wetland habitats. Purple loosestrife is the monopoly of the plant community. With no natural predators, when it starts to grow, it completely takes over. It can grow in rock crevasses and gravel, in sand, clay, and soil. As long as there is water available and the temperature is around 68 degrees Fahrenheit, some of the time, there is nothing that can stop this plant from spreading.

In prime conditions, seedlings can grow over one centimeter a day and can flower in their first growing season. Each mature plant can have 30 to 50 shoots growing from one rootstock and can produce over 2 million seeds annually. Seeds escape from gardens and nurseries into wetlands, lakes, and rivers. Once in aquatic systems, seeds are easily spread by moving water and wetland animals.

If producing millions of seeds a year isn't enough, purple loosestrife also reproduces vegetatively through underground stems that can grow up to one foot every year. It is easy to see how, with no form of natural control, this plant can out compete other plants with no hesitation.



Purple loosestrife (nps.gov)

Identifying Purple Loosestrife

The plant itself is a perennial herb that stands straight up. It has a square-ish, woody stem that normally has little soft hairs, called downy hairs. Depending on growing conditions, purple loosestrife can grow between 4 and 10 feet tall.

The leaves are shaped like long skinny hearts and are arranged in pairs or whorled (three or more leaves equally spaced around the stem). Its flowers are light purple or magenta in color and are in bloom throughout most of the summer. The individual flowers have between five and seven petals and grow on flower spikes.

What is being done to control purple loosestrife?

Research has been going on for decades to determine the best way to control purple loosestrife. While juvenile plants can easily be uprooted, mature plants have complex root systems and are difficult to remove by pulling. Herbicides have been shown to work, but need to be continuously applied to keep purple loosestrife from coming back to an area and may also negatively effect some native plant and animal species. Herbicide application should also be avoided around sensitive habitat areas, such as water bodies.

Mowing or cutting is not practical for sites where loosestrife is growing in an aquatic or semi-aquatic environment. However, if conditions permit, and if executed prior to flowering, mowing or cutting can reduce seed production. Equipment used in mowing should be washed thoroughly to prevent the spread of seeds to unaffected areas.

After close observations of hundreds of insect species native to Europe, scientists found several insects that specifically feed on purple loosestrife. The root-mining weevil, the black-margined loosestrife beetle, the golden loosestrife beetle, and the loosestrife flower weevil were approved by the Technical Advisory Group to be released into North America in hopes they would help to suppress purple loosestrife. Since the first release of the four introduced species, there have been many sites where purple loosestrife has noticeably diminished. Controlling purple loosestrife infestations can take several years to achieve satisfactory results, so follow up monitoring and management activities are critical in ensuring the plant population is diminishing.

Native Alternatives:



Blazing Star/ Gayfeather



Joe Pye Weed



Blue Vervain (nps.gov)

Here's what you can do to prevent and control the spread of purple loosestrife.

- Do not purchase, sell, distribute or plant purple loosestrife.
- Pull up juvenile purple loosestrife plants by grasping the base of the plant firmly and slowly pull up. Be sure to get the roots.
- If you find purple loosestrife on your property use glyphosate type herbicide and follow directions carefully. Do not over use!
- Share your knowledge of purple loosestrife with friends, family, and coworkers.