

Weeds often start in gardens

By Barbara Duckworth
Calgary bureau

RED DEER — Gardeners could be buying a noxious weed when they select an easy to grow, hardy plant that promises prolific growth.

"That should be a red flag," said Marian Jones of the newly formed Alberta Invasive Plants Council.

Many of the most serious invasive weeds like oxeye daisy, purple loosestrife and medicinal herbs that take over wetlands and pastures in Canada have been sold through garden centres.

"If an invasive ornamental is for sale, ask the retailer why," Jones said at the inaugural meeting of the council in Red Deer April 13.

"It becomes extremely difficult to convince some people that some of those pretty wild flowers are a problem."

Jones said prevention is easier and cheaper when it comes to controlling invasive ornamental plants.

It is important to be able to identify the species in natural areas and garden centres.

Check the contents of wildflower seed mixes for invasive plants.

"If the container does not have a list, don't buy

it," she said.

Beware of plant listings like spurge, bird snapdragon, chicory and butter and eggs.

Look under bird feeders regularly where seeds may have dropped and germinated.

To get rid of them from a garden, carefully pull up from the root or as far down the stem as possible. Place in a sealed plastic bag, being careful not to spread seeds. Weeds should be burned rather than composted or thrown in the garbage.

"If you see a patch, don't move through it," she said.

Remove seed and plant parts from clothing, pets and vehicles.

Many of these plants were transplanted as a result of the efforts of acclimatization societies starting in France in 1854. The goal was to bring in new species for agricultural and ornamental purposes, often at the expense of native species. Many plants were sent to the colonies because it was thought these areas were bereft of interesting species.

Only about 10 percent of ornamentals behave invasively. But once they are introduced, they naturalize and start to

spread, choking out native species or clogging watercourses. Often, no one notices until they affect human activities.

The oxeye daisy came to New England from Europe in the 1850s. Plant breeder Luther Burbank in 1884 began a breeding program and used root division to propagate it, creating the Shasta daisy. It was not supposed to produce seed.

"Shastas have been found to revert to type, meaning they go back to producing seed and readily crossbreed with oxeye and the offspring now have an aggressive reproductive behaviour," Jones said.

The oxeye daisy has become a troublesome plant along the banks of the Bow River in Alberta and has nearly taken over patches of land around Lake Minnewanka at Banff, B.C.

An ambitious project at Canmore encouraged gardeners to dig up their daisies and return them to local garden centres in exchange for new, non-invasive perennials.

Common toadflax is another troublesome plant in Western Canada. It came from the Mediterra-

nean 100 years ago. It produces millions of seeds but primarily spreads through creeping root systems, making it difficult to control.

It rebounded last year after two years of drought. It has snapdragon type yellow flowers and can harm livestock.

Common tansy was imported 400 years ago and used as an insect repellent and for embalming. It reproduces by seed and rhizomes. A similar plant with frilled leaves as opposed to flat leaves is available in garden centres.

Dame's rocket came from Eurasia in the 1600s and is a member of the mustard family. It often ends up in wildflower mixes

and can be confused with garden phlox.

Other invasive ornamentals include baby's breath, Queen Anne's lace and bachelor's buttons, also known as cornflower.

Caraway began as an agricultural crop 25 years ago but was carried on vehicles into pipeline installations. It is extremely invasive and can replace grass in a couple years. Livestock won't graze it until after a frost.

"Buy your caraway at the grocery store," Jones said.



Dame's rocket often ends up in wildflower mixes. (File photos)



Toadflax spreads through creeping root systems, making it difficult to control.

Purple loosestrife pluckers make headway

Calgary bureau

RED DEER — Combatting the marsh monster of purple loosestrife has been a 15 year battle for those who fight weeds every summer.

Each year, volunteers and weed control staff from municipalities travel the Bow River in Alberta by canoe. They chart the spread of this plant that has crowded out natural vegetation like cattails and rushes in wetlands.

"In the back channels along the river it will even crowd out the fish if it gets thick enough," said George Stalker, who leads a program to control noxious weeds in the Bow River basin.

Purple loosestrife removal from riparian areas is a priority, he told the Alberta Invasive Plants Council meeting in Red Deer April 13.

Riparian wetlands make up about two percent

of the prairie landscape but provide habitat to 80 percent of its wildlife.

Originally from Eurasia, purple loosestrife, also called lythrum, was a minor part of wetlands there. It probably arrived on ships in northeastern North America nearly 200 years ago. It gained popularity as a garden plant and for honey production. It is found in all Canadian provinces.

One plant is capable of producing 30-50 stems per sq. foot and it can grow to three metres in height. It can release one million seeds per plant. Listed as a noxious weed in Alberta, it has few natural predators.

People have been encouraged to dig it out of their yards and exchange it for new perennials at garden centres. In Alberta, thousands of plants have been exchanged for free perennial replace-

ments from Canmore to Medicine Hat.

Meanwhile the plant with purple flowering spikes continues to appear along watercourses.

The annual survey starts with a scan of riparian areas by helicopter when the plants are in full flower.

"Many previously unknown infestations are found this way," Stalker said.

Every sighting is plotted on a map, recorded using satellite sighting surveys and added to a database. Volunteers then head out in canoes to start removing plants in creeks, channels and the main river.

Recently, a low dose herbicide was allowed to be sprayed up to one metre from the water's edge. The decision to use herbicide was reached after years of digging and pulling the plants did not

work. A site of 300 plants would take a full day to remove by hand.

The team's efforts with mechanical removal and herbicide resulted in an 88 percent reduction in plant numbers. The Bow River region has had a 99 percent reduction to 737 plants in 2004 from 101,523 plants in 1999.

Downstream neighbours from Calgary in the municipal districts of Rockyview and Foothills have seen a slight increase, perhaps because of changing wetlands due to drought.

However, there was a dramatic reduction in Wheatland County east of the city. One backwater had more than 100,000 plants in 1999 but the control program had reduced numbers to 242 plants by last year.

—DUCKWORTH

Drift Control

LI700

Makes Any Glyphosate Work Better

- PH reducer
- Penetrant
- Experience the difference
- Contact your local dealer for details



West: 1-800-561-5444 Ontario: 1-800-265-4624 Quebec & Maritimes: 1-800-361-9369 www.uap.ca