

PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE: THE SILENT MENACE



Spikes of rose-purple flowers with 5 or 6 petals.

Danger? In a harmless plant with pretty purple flowers? Yes. Purple loosestrife's beauty is deceptive: it is killing our nation's wetlands.

Purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), a non-native flowering plant, has devastated wetlands across the country. This plant quickly invades and takes over wetland areas, crowding out native plants that provide food and

shelter for wildlife. Its dense roots and leaves clog water channels. A long-time problem in the eastern and northern central U.S., loosestrife has now arrived in the Rocky Mountains.

PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE'S LETHAL WEAPONS

No enemies: Brought to the United States from Europe, purple loosestrife left behind the insects and diseases that control it there. While our native plant populations are kept in balance by insects, disease, and foraging animals, loosestrife spreads unchecked.

The power of reproduction: A perennial plant, purple loosestrife sends up numerous flowering stems year after year, each with tremendous seed production. In one year, a single mature plant can produce up to 3 million seeds that may survive for 20 years before sprouting. New loosestrife plants can also grow from small pieces of broken or mowed plants.

Protective beauty: People have accelerated the spread of purple loosestrife by planting it. This

tall, long-blooming plant is certainly a delight to see. In spite of the harm it causes, some nurseries, landscapers, and gardeners still sell and plant loosestrife. Others have planted it as a pollen source for honey bees. Perhaps you have seen loosestrife's showy rose-purple flowers in a garden or field near you.

IDENTIFYING PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE

Distinctive features: An upright plant, loosestrife ranges from 2 to 7 feet tall. Tongue-shaped leaves with smooth edges, attached directly to a 4-sided stem, grow opposite each other. Purple flowers, each with 5 or 6 petals, grow on vertical "spikes" and bloom from the bottom up.

Where it grows: Loosestrife needs wet soil or shallow standing water. Look for it in habitats such as cattail marshes, wet meadows, streambanks, lakeshores, and ditches. (If watered, it will also thrive in most gardens.)

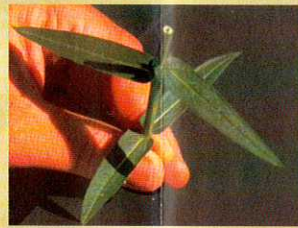
Spotting purple loosestrife: Its bright blossoms make loosestrife easy to find. Look for it during the flowering season, from late June through September.

How it spreads:

Loosestrife's tiny seeds are easily disbursed through the mud that sticks on wildlife fur, people's boots, car tires, and birds' feet. The seeds may also float long distances downstream. By simply walking through a field of its pretty flowers, you could create a new purple loosestrife infestation.



A bush-like plant growing up to 7 feet.




Four-sided stem with smooth, flat leaves.





Purple loosestrife is planted for its rose-purple flowers that bloom throughout the summer. But this showy plant threatens our wetlands.

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 City of Boulder Open Space Department
66 South Cherryvale Road
Boulder, Colorado 80505
(305) 441-4142

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WARNING: DANGER IN THE FIELD



PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE DESTROYS

Wildlife

A wetland with lots of purple loosestrife is soon a wetland with little wildlife. Growing in dense thickets, loosestrife crowds out native plants that wildlife use for food, nesting, and hiding places. Critical habitats such as open sandbars and shallow waters quickly fill up with purple loosestrife. Canvasback ducks, sandhill cranes, turtles, spawning fish, and other wetland animals move out when loosestrife moves in.

PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE DESTROYS

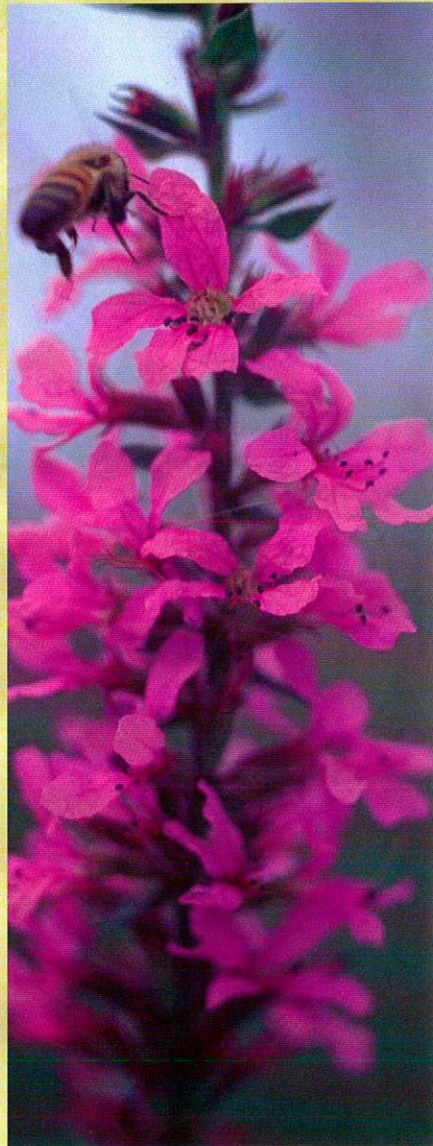
Irrigation

Purple loosestrife grows where it finds water – in ditches and streambanks, in reservoirs and marshes. Multiplying quickly, it soon clogs water channels. This means that less water makes its way down irrigation canals to fields and watering troughs. Reversing these effects can take considerable time and money.

PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE DESTROYS

Recreation

Like to go boating or canoeing? What about fishing or duck hunting? Perhaps you enjoy watching birds and wildlife from afar. Purple loosestrife could spoil your fun. When loosestrife takes over, opportunities for outdoor activities around water diminish. Communities dependent upon local tourism and recreation lose precious revenue.



YOU CAN HELP

Your help is needed to stop purple loosestrife from destroying valuable wetlands and streambanks.

◆ Remove loosestrife from your property immediately. Be careful not to confuse it with look-alikes such as native loosestrife (*Lythrum alatum*), fireweed (*Chamerion (Epilobium) danielsii*), and gayfeather/blazing star (*Liatris punctata*), pictured here. If you're uncertain, consult an expert. (See listing below.)

◆ Don't plant purple loosestrife! Gayfeather/blazing star and horsemint/pink bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) are attractive native alternatives. Your state's Native Plant Society may have other suggestions.

◆ Does your local nursery sell purple loosestrife? Ask them to stop. Even those varieties advertised not to make seeds can cross-breed with the invading loosestrife to produce seeds.

◆ Contact your county and state agencies to request formal designation of purple loosestrife as a "noxious weed."

◆ Report all sightings of purple loosestrife. See addresses and phone numbers at right.

STOP THE SPREAD

Take care: Wetland areas where purple loosestrife grows are sensitive. When removing it, make sure not to pollute the water or disturb native vegetation. If done at the wrong time or in the wrong manner, attempts to control loosestrife might even spread it. Mowing, for instance, spreads cut pieces of the plant that can create new infestations.

Catch it early: Small purple loosestrife populations can explode in only a few years. Getting rid of it early saves time and money.

Prevent seed production: Just prior to flowering, cut off budding stalks. Repeat throughout the flowering season (June–September). This won't kill purple loosestrife, but will help prevent it from spreading.



Fireweed
Native Look-Alikes: Look closely to see how these valuable native plants differ from purple loosestrife. Native loosestrife: plant is shorter and more delicate with fewer flowers. Fireweed: stem is round; flowers have only 4 petals. Gayfeather/blazing star: leaves are coarse and much narrower.



Gayfeather/Blazing Star
Native Loosestrife

Manual removal of small populations (fewer than 100 plants): Hand pull or dig seedlings and plants before flowers go to seed. Remove all plant material – roots and stems left will sprout. Don't let plant parts float away! Place cut loosestrife in a dry area where it won't grow, or bag and remove from the site.

Chemical treatment on larger populations: Use only those herbicides approved for aquatic areas. Be sure to apply correctly for the greatest impact on purple loosestrife.

Avoid excessive injury to other plants and animals through careful spot application. Your county extension office or local land management agency can provide further information on herbicides.

Persistence pays: Since purple loosestrife seeds remain alive in the soil for many years, repeated control efforts will be necessary to stop it from spreading.

REPORT SIGHTINGS OF PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE

Denver Metro Area

Dave Weber, Division of Wildlife
6060 Broadway
Denver, CO 80216
(305) 291-7251

Boulder County

City of Boulder Open Space Department
66 South Cherryvale Road
Boulder, CO 80505
(305) 441-4142

Elsewhere in Colorado

Colorado Department of Agriculture
700 Kipling, Suite 4000
Lakewood, CO 80215
(303) 259-4140

In Other States

Contact your local county extension office.