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By Seth Luginbill

Program Coordinator, Island County Noxious Weed Control Program

WHERE WEEDS MEET THE WATER: A LOOK AT NOXIOUS WEED MANAGEMENT ON WHIDBEY ISLAND

Winter is a fascinating time here on Whidbey Island. The cool, wet winds whip through the prairie and just as suddenly, we experience the bright sun beaming down and reminding us spring and the warmth it brings has not forgotten about us. It also serves as a reminder that with these slowly lengthening days and increases in warmth, germinating plants return and our green landscape becomes an even more vibrant picture to take in.

While most of this greenery is pleasant and welcoming, some of the plants we are starting to see are not.

Noxious weeds have been a part of our cohabitation with the landscape for some time now and likely will be for some time to come. The damaging effects they have on plant and animal communities cannot be understated. A few bites of poison hemlock can kill a full grown cow; the sap from giant hogweed can react with the skin, causing severe blistering; and the establishment of common cordgrass in our estuaries and salt marshes is degrading important habitat for many of our marine industries. However, before delving any further into the plentiful negatives of having noxious weeds present in the landscape, the questions must be asked: *What are noxious weeds? What principles can landowners utilize to effectively manage them? What can you do to participate in this action to protect our islands precious natural resources?*

"Noxious weeds" are undesirable, non-native plants that have economic, ecological, or aesthetic implications. They are often highly destructive and extremely competitive with native flora, making them very difficult to control. At this stage, it is also important to note there is a difference between "noxious" and what are commonly referred to as "invasive" weeds. The term "noxious" refers to species that are regulated or monitored as prescribed by state law. They are broken up into a series of three classes and represent the worst offenders to our ecosystems in Washington State. While we will focus on noxious weeds here, the principles by which we manage them can easily be applied to any invasive plant community. By utilizing principles of Integrated Vegetative Management (IVM), the control board has come up with seven considerations to factor into your weed control.

First, determine your land-use goals. Is the land to be used for wildlife habitat, feeding pollinators, forage production, recreational land maintenance, or for attractive home landscaping?

Decide how much of each weed is acceptable on your site, but be sure to control those noxious weeds as necessary by law. Noxious weeds are broken up into three categories: *Class A weeds* require eradication; *Class B weeds* require control (seed suppression and isolation) as the appropriate prescription; and for *Class C weeds* there is no legal restriction for landowners, but control and eradication are strongly encouraged. Knowing which categories your infestations fall into can help in knowing where to place your priorities.

Design your management plan to create sites for the species you want and to help prevent weeds from invading. Remember, a whole spectrum of tools and techniques are available when it comes to weed management. Control measures ranging from grazers and insects (biological control), to herbicide use (chemical control), to simply getting your

hands dirty and digging out plants (mechanical control), all have a part to play in adaptively achieving success.

Set yourself up to succeed by dividing large noxious weed infestations into sections. Limit the size of the area you work on to something manageable and then target a new area. Small wins go a long way.

Monitor your progress periodically to see if noxious weeds are decreasing, new weeds are appearing, and desired plants are establishing. Taking pictures can help gauge progress, and comparing before-and-after pictures is rewarding!

Adjust your control methods as needed, or get more help from your county weed board if you don't think you are making enough progress. Our program currently offers consultations for landowners on their infestations; we have a weed wrench rental program in place, and assistance for those landowners who might have physical or financial limitations in performing required control work.

Finally, as our friends at the Whidbey Island Conservation District have done well to point out in recent "Make a Difference" articles, it is critical to **revegetate bare ground** with desired plant species before weeds get a chance to grow back. Have a plan in place before you begin your noxious weed control.

Through all this one might ask, *"How might I make an impact?"* First and foremost, noxious weed control is a community effort that takes a collective response from both public and private entities. Weeds don't adhere to human boundaries imparted on the landscape and to think this is one person's problem is to not respect the incredible adaptability of these weedy plants. I'm proud to relay evidence this respect is alive and well here on Whidbey Island and can be seen in the communities' response to this crisis. This past year saw Island County residences and organizations dispose of a colossal 75 tons of noxious weed material at solid waste facilities. Even the little projects and eradications add up to a significant amount of success.

Second, noxious weeds are highly adaptive and using a dynamic approach in their control is the best way to achieve success in suppressing these unwanted species. Using IVM tools give us as land managers the upper hand as well as the flexibility to fit weed management into a context we are comfortable with from a financial and philosophical viewpoint. Incorporating biological, cultural, mechanical, and chemical control techniques allows us to adaptively address a host of situations and invasive plant occurrences.

Third, and finally, as you wrap up your list of cozy winter-time reads might I encourage you to add a few items to your list. You can start by checking out the Island County Noxious Weed Control Board's webpage at our new home at Island County DNR (<https://www.islandcountywa.gov/Health/DNR/Noxious-Weed/Pages/Home.aspx>) for material relating to noxious weed law, technical advice for control work, and opportunities to participate in noxious weed control throughout Whidbey Island. You may also contact us with any of your questions at s.luginbill@co.island.wa.us or (360)678-7992.

My sincerest hope is this article gives you a small sense of the task at hand, but more importantly it leaves you with a sense of ownership and desire to play a part in keeping these island invaders out of our forests, fields, and shorelines. I wish you all happy weeding!

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