

NEWS RELEASE – WEED OF THE WEEK SERIES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

22 NOVEMBER 2006

HITCHHIKER WEEDS

With fall well upon us and winter knocking on our door, most invasive plants have been impacted by frost and are wilted or already dried. The exception of course is winter annuals, which germinate in the fall or winter and grow during any brief spell of warm weather, but otherwise remain somewhat dormant during the winter. I will discuss this group of weeds in a future article.

Despite the seemingly harmless appearance of these mature plants, do not be lulled into complacency. Many of these invaders still harbour an abundance of viable seeds that are waiting for an opportunity to spread far and wide. Two weeds in our region that currently appear dried and lifeless use a unique mode of seed dispersal that entails hitching a ride on passing humans, wildlife, livestock and pets. These weeds have been aptly nicknamed hitchhiker weeds. Residents are likely already familiar with the large bulb-like seed heads of common burdock (*Arctium minus*) or the small tear-shaped nutlets of hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*). The sticky Velcro-like burs of burdock or the barbed seeds of hound's-tongue readily attach to fur, clothing and footwear.

These Eurasian biennials have become invasive weeds of rangelands, pastures, cut-blocks, disturbed habitats, ditches, stream banks and roadsides. In the Okanagan-Similkameen, they are common in low to mid elevation grasslands and forests, as well as creek side (riparian) areas with moist, fertile soils and high nitrogen content. Once established, they are highly competitive and have the potential to out-compete native vegetation, negatively impacting wildlife habitat and livestock rangeland.

Both species also have direct impacts to wildlife and livestock. Hound's-tongue plants are toxic and may cause liver damage in grazing animals, especially horses and cattle. The hooked spines on burdock seed heads can result in eye infections in livestock. The burs/seeds from both species can also irritate skin and stress livestock, resulting in reduced sale values and potentially increased veterinary costs. There have also been several reports of dead bats discovered attached to burdock seed heads. It appears that these flying mammals fly into the burdock, presumably while foraging for insects, then become stuck and are unable to escape. With several of our local bat species classified as rare or threatened, the loss of individuals to burdock poses a serious concern to the recovery of local populations.

Many people are not familiar with these biennial plants in their first-year stage, when they exist as large tufts of low growing leaves. Common burdock resembles garden rhubarb with large heart-shaped leaves minus the red stems, and can reach 1 to 3 metres (3 to 10 feet) in height, while hound's-tongue has distinctly tongue-shaped leaves, musky purple flowers and grows from 0.3 to 1.2 metres (1 to 4 feet) tall. Plants of both species bolt and flower during their second year. Seed production begins shortly after flowering, typically yielding 2,000-4,000 seeds per plant for hound's-tongue and between 6,000 and 16,000 seeds for burdock.

Because both species reproduce entirely by seed, control efforts should be directed towards reducing seed output and preventing dispersal. You can help by checking clothing and pets when moving between weed-infested and weed-free areas. Ensure that seeds remain in the affected area. Landowners can also help by reducing soil disturbance and maintaining healthy lands with a vigorous population of desirable plants to provide ground cover. Disturbed soils should be re-seeded as soon as possible to provide competition and prevent invasive plants from establishing.

Effective control of these plants is highly dependent on stage of growth. During their first year of growth, the growing tissue must be removed which means the top 3 to 4 inches of the roots must be dug-out. The taproot functions to store nutrient and energy reserves until the plant is ready to bolt the following spring. If plants have bolted and are blooming, there is no need to dig up the roots. Instead, at this stage, plants may be cut as close as possible to the ground. At this time of year when seeds are present, plants should be carefully clipped and bagged, then taken to the landfill. Composting will not necessarily kill the seeds, so plant material should be buried.

For anyone who wishes to view previous Weed of the Week articles, be sure to check out the Hot Topics or Press Releases sections of the RDOS website www.rdos.bc.ca.

For more information on invasive plants, contact Lisa Scott, Weed Coordinator for the Okanagan-Similkameen Regional District at (250) 492-0237 or email info@rdos.bc.ca
