

Invasive WEEDS

A GROWING PAIN

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Many weeds have pretty flowers but they are a growing pain. They crowd out native plants, harm animal habitats, and increase erosion.

Starting June 1, 2010, the Alberta Weed Control Act will be changing. A number of new weed species will be added to Alberta's prohibited and noxious weed list.

The number of prohibited plant species on the list is increasing from six under the old legislation to a whopping 46 in the new act, recognizing non-native, invasive species that have the potential to grow in Alberta but either have not arrived in full force yet, or are in very small numbers and need to be eradicated.

As a result of this new legislation, it is prohibited to transport, buy, sell, or distribute plants or plant parts of these regulated plants into or within Alberta. It is further prohibited to intentionally transplant wild plants and/or plant parts of these species. Should one of these weeds exist on a property, the landowner must destroy that weed immediately.

Noxious plant species on the list went from 25 to 29, most of which are present in Alberta but need to be controlled from spreading due to impacts on native plants, ecology, and local agriculture. Should

one of the weed species now considered "noxious" exist on a property, the landowner must take effective measures to control that weed.

What does this mean to you as a landowner? Some garden plants not considered "dangerous" in the past are now recognized as invasive, and if you have them in your garden, it's a good time to replace them with a native or innocuous species. So as you make choices for your perennial beds this year, avoid the new invasive plant species prohibited in Alberta.

Rocky View County's Agricultural Services department lists noxious and prohibited weed species, landowner responsibilities, and alternate plantings at www.rockyview.ca.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A NOXIOUS WEED?

Many people are familiar with the concept of weeds in the context of their yard or garden. Weeds are simply undesirable plant species. The same principle holds true for Rocky View County's roadsides, natural areas, and farms which are home to a diverse array of native plants. Over the past 150 years, many non-native plants have been introduced to our region, both intentionally and accidentally. The vast majority of these plants co-exist with native species, and are ecologically harmless.

What makes a plant noxious in the context of Rocky View County's natural resources is its negative impact on natural areas, or its ability to spread and crowd out native plants. Noxious weeds are those able to reproduce in the wild, spread rapidly, which are difficult to control, or which cause the decline or loss of our native plants.

As noxious weeds did not evolve locally, their populations are not held in check by natural predators or diseases, giving them a competitive edge over native plants. Noxious weed species can proliferate and spread over large areas. Some are able to completely displace other vegetation, forming a homogenous (single species) cover. Contrast this situation with the rich variety and diversity of a native plant community, as is seen in prairies, wetlands, or forests.

Noxious weeds are exotic plants that have reached Rocky View County by escaping from gardens, being transported by hay or straw, air, dirt, tires, clothing, etc. They grow aggressively, lack natural enemies, and resist management methods. These species can move quickly into bare areas that have been disturbed by construction or erosion, have poor vegetative cover, or other soil disturbances.

Some of Rocky View's noxious weeds are spread by wind blown seed, birds, or other organisms. Other weeds spread through poorly-timed mowing, or baling of hay to be fed to livestock or sold. Other noxious weeds spread by sending rhizomes (long underground roots) to uninfested areas.

Most of Rocky View's noxious weeds can be controlled through proper management. However, several of the County's worst noxious weeds are very difficult to control, such as Canada Thistle, Yellow Clematis, and Oxeye Daisy. A primary key to weed control is early detection and management, before that weed has spread and built up a large seed bank and energy reserve.

HOW CAN YOU CONTROL OR PREVENT THE SPREAD OF NOXIOUS WEEDS?

The most important step of prevention is early detection. Weeds are far easier to control in the early stages of development. If the weeds do get a strong foothold, they will grow extremely deep roots that make it very hard to control and remove.

HERE ARE SOME ADDITIONAL TIPS ON HOW TO CONTROL OR PREVENT THEIR SPREAD:

- To help maintain weed-free crops, lawns, or pastures, keep them well irrigated, fertilized, and not overgrazed. Strong, healthy grass, alfalfa, and other kinds of plants are more likely to stop weed development. Weeds spread like wildfire in thin, stringy grass.
- The best lawn weed prevention is a thick, healthy, and well-cultivated turf. Poor fertilizing, mowing, irrigation, watering, drainage, insect or disease outbreaks, and bad soil compaction can all lead to a thin, unhealthy turf.
- Sanitation is another method to prevent spreading weeds. Sanitation involves the practice of not planting or removing certain plants from a specific area (like the lawn). Keeping lawn mower blades and other lawn management equipment clean is another effective measure.

• If the lawn or field must be seeded or reseeded, buy only high quality seeds so there is less chance of also planting some weed seeds. Certified weed-free seed will ensure that the seeds are of very high quality.

• If you order garden seeds via the Internet, be mindful that many supply houses don't recognize the new legislation yet, therefore you can often still purchase seeds prohibited in Alberta. Most of the Calgary-area horticulture supply outlets (including big-box stores) have agreed not to sell noxious or prohibited seeds and plants, recognizing the changes in the act.

• In some cases, physical controls may be impractical or ineffective, and use of herbicides may be warranted. If possible, they should be wiped onto cut stems or targeted to the specific weed species (be sure to check what methods are appropriate for your weed and the product chosen). These methods decrease the amount of herbicide used as well as the amount dispersed into the environment, and are preferred over spray applications.

Rocky View County's weed inspectors are available to help you identify suspicious plants and offer control options. Please visit Rocky View's website or phone 403-230-1401 for more information.

