

Mediterranean Sage in Larimer County

Mediterranean sage (*Salvia aethiopsis* L.), a plant native to the Mediterranean region, Southeastern Europe and North Africa, was introduced into this country as an ornamental garden plant. Like many other exotic garden plants, Mediterranean sage has jumped borders and become an aggressive weed that has crowded out other plants and taken over pastures and rangeland. This biennial (lives two seasons) of the mint family emerges in the fall or spring, and forms a rosette (flattened wide leaves). At this early growth stage Mediterranean sage is often confused with common mullein, but it's very hairy leaves emit a strong sage-like smell when pinched, a good identification characteristic. In the late spring a central stem grows out from the rosette, becomes branched and produces white flowers that become seed heads by late June. The central stem breaks from the plant by mid-summer and becomes a tumble-weed that disperses seed as it blows across pastures. Mediterranean sage is unpalatable to grazing animals and has become an invasive rangeland weed that infests over 1.5 million acres in California, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington.

In Colorado, Mediterranean sage is found only in Boulder, Garfield and Larimer Counties. Because of the plant's potential to take over large areas, the Colorado Department of Agriculture has listed the species for eradication through state designation as a 'List A' weed (for detailed information contact the Colorado Department of Agriculture, Conservation Services Division, www.colorado.gov/ag/csd then select the Noxious Weed Management Program). Local government agencies are directed by the state to carry out eradication efforts. Effective management of Mediterranean sage consists of digging or pulling (removing at least the top 3 inches of taproot) or applying an herbicide before seed is produced. The Larimer County Weed District, with grant money made available by the state, provides herbicide applications free of charge.

Larimer County has an estimated 250 acres of privately owned pasture land west of Berthoud infested with Mediterranean sage. Land owners say the weed has been around that part of the county for at least 15 years, probably introduced into the area with contaminated hay. This area is bounded by County Roads 4 and 8 on the south and north, and County Roads 23 and 27 on the east and west. Aggressive management efforts in Larimer County over that past several years have contained and suppressed infestations of Mediterranean sage, but this plant persists due to seed longevity and wide range dispersal of seed by way of the tumbleweed nature of plants at maturity. If you think your property contains Mediterranean sage and would like to request a site visit and/or herbicide application, contact the Larimer County Weed District at 970-498-5768.