

Myrtle Spurge – Ornamental Garden Plant or Noxious Weed?

Myrtle spurge (*Euphorbia myrsinites*) is a garden plant long used as a xeriscape (drought tolerant) species in flower beds and rock gardens throughout Colorado and other western states. Myrtle spurge produces bright yellow, flower-like bracts very early in the spring, an attractive aspect of this showy ornamental. The blue-green leaves are very fleshy, aligned in an alternate arrangement along trailing stems, which gives the plant its other name, donkey-tail spurge.

So what's the problem with this showy, drought-tolerant garden plant? Myrtle spurge has escaped from city flower beds to become an invasive weed on many open space areas in the state, particularly in mountain counties. Like other escaped ornamentals which are now on the state weed list such as butter-and-eggs and purple loosestrife, this highly competitive plant has the potential to become an expensive, tough-to-control weed in Colorado's back country. Additionally, myrtle spurge produces a caustic, milky latex within its stems and leaves that, when exposed to the skin, can cause severe irritation, or temporary blindness if in contact with an eye.

The Colorado Department of Agriculture placed myrtle spurge on the state's List A category, meaning this plant is prohibited from being sold at nurseries and garden shops, and is designated for eradication. Eradication of a weedy species requires pulling, digging, or applying an herbicide to completely kill the plant, as opposed to suppression methods such as mowing. For complete information on the State Noxious Weed Act, noxious weed lists, and fact sheets, contact the Colorado Department of Agriculture, Conservation Services Division, (www.colorado.gov/ag/csd) then select the Noxious Weed Management Program.

Because myrtle spurge has become so well established in city and suburban flower gardens, enforcement of state and local weed laws has been somewhat lenient. Hopefully education on the invasiveness and impacts of myrtle spurge will encourage landowners to comply with local weed law. Most management activity has been hand pulling. Myrtle spurge is a perennial that produces a simple taproot, unlike perennials such as Canada thistle that produce an extensive underground root system. So pulling most of the root from the ground will effectively control the plant. Keep in mind the sap from the plant is caustic and precautions must be taken to protect skin and eyes. If seed has been produced it will be necessary to bag the pulled plants to prevent seed dispersal. A number of herbicides are effective for controlling myrtle spurge. For further information on identification and management, or to set up a site visit, please call Tim D'Amato, with the Estes Land Stewardship Area (ELSA), at 970-498-5769.