

Ornamental Weeds

For those who enjoy learning new oxymoron terms, here's one for you – “ornamental weeds”. The term describes noxious weed species that originated as garden plants then jumped fences to invade forests, river systems, wetlands, pastures, rangeland, and roadsides. Many of the weed problems confronting Colorado land managers originated from backyard flower gardens. How did this come about? Over the course of decades, the plant nursery industry has selected ornamental plants from all over the world for various characteristics. A showy, attractive flower obviously tops the list, but other characteristics desirable in the western U.S. were also selected for: drought tolerance, soil stabilization, and food and cover for wildlife. In most cases this has not been a problem. Landowners are encouraged to plant xeric species to reduce water needs, and to provide food and cover for wildlife.

Unfortunately many of the ornamental plants introduced to the U.S. from other parts of the world have adapted too well. Without environmental checks from native lands such as predatory insects, soil nematodes, disease and other factors, some plant species have become invasive and detrimental to our natural areas. A few examples are:

- Yellow toadflax, better known as butter-and-eggs. This perennial of the snap dragon family has invaded many natural areas near mountain communities. In the Flat Tops Wilderness near Meeker, Colorado, yellow toadflax is a major weed infesting thousands of acres.
- Purple loosestrife, a perennial plant that thrives in riparian areas displacing native plants and wildlife. Purple loosestrife dominates millions of acres of marshland in eastern and Midwestern states, but in Colorado, is uncommon enough that diligent management efforts could eventually result in eradication.
- Russian olive, a thorny tree that readily spreads by seed. Russian olives were at one time promoted for wind breaks by government agencies and were widely planted as ornamental trees. Many river bottoms and other moist sites are now dominated by dense thickets of Russian olives.

These plants and others determined to be invasive are now on the prohibited sales list for plant nurseries in Colorado. Many ornamental plants are on the State Noxious Weed list categorized as List A species that require eradication: myrtle spurge, cypress spurge, dyer's woad, orange hawkweed, and purple loosestrife. Others categorized as List B species may require management depending on local weed ordinances: absinth wormwood, bouncingbet, chamomile, Chinese clematis, dalmatian toadflax, dames rocket, oxeye daisy, Russian olive, saltcedar, and yellow toadflax.

Be a responsible gardener and remove any of these species if you have them on your property. For further information contact the Larimer County Weed District office at 970-498-5768 or Colorado State University Extension office at 970-498-6003.

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