

Purple loosestrife spreading rapidly

in Southern Ontario



Lythrum salicaria was introduced to the North Eastern United States from Europe in the early 1800's, probably through ship's ballast or livestock bedding. Indigenous to Europe the plant, it has been found, has no natural enemies in North America allowing it, in the words of Dr. Catling, "to go crazy".

Aiding the plant's spread is a lack of understanding by the public. The perennials are sold in nurseries across Ontario and have been used as forage by beekeepers. So, in addition to the plant's inherent ability to reproduce and expand (a mature purple loosestrife can produce over 2 million seeds each growing season) its commercial availability offers further encouragement to spread.

Purple loosestrife, rather than cohabitating with native flora, tends to dominate - pushing out cattails, reed canary grass, sedges and bullrushes. Consequently, the native fauna, the fish and birds, are deprived of a major food source. In the long term the extensive root structure drains wetlands converting it to soil and taking away waterfowl nesting grounds and fish spawning areas.

Pretty as it may be it is quickly coming to be termed "the purple plague".

It is, however, more commonly known as purple loosestrife. And, needless to say the tall purple plant is certainly becoming a familiar sight along roadsides, in marshes and in gardens throughout southern Ontario.

For those concerned with the continued survival of Canada's wetlands *Lythrum salicaria* is becoming all too familiar. The tall purple-flowered plant, beautiful maybe, is ultimately destructive and spreading at a very rapid rate.

Purple loosestrife, says Kevin Callan, Wildlife Habitat Facilitator with the Ontario Federation of Hunters and Anglers (OFAH) "eliminates all other plant species, thereby eliminating fish and wildlife habitat and its thick roots eventually convert wetland marshes into soil".

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