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## **Eye on the Environment It's Weed Season Again, Promote Native Plants**

By Anne Dahl, Swan Ecosystem Center

The first yellow violets and beautiful magenta shooting stars pop up in late May and early June. It's fun to search them out on an afternoon wildflower walk. But this is also the time of year when we notice the first rosettes of noxious weeds.

Most of us are familiar with spotted knapweed and oxeye daisy, their earliest leaves growing low to the ground in tidy circular clusters. Sighting these first rosettes can take some of the cheer out of spring. They remind us of commitments made last fall to reduce the noxious weeds growing on our properties.

The tiny fairy slipper orchid is another spring wildflower we watch for along forest edges—a rose-purple beauty. They bloom around the time the clusters of yellow, bell-like Oregon grape flowers come in to blossom. We find the orchids and Oregon grape growing close to the ground, intermixed with hundreds of other natives in the lush natural gardens of our forested landscape.

This is also when the rosettes of the noxious orange and yellow hawkweeds are noticeable, their fuzzy lance-shaped leaves forming mats that spread each year. The blossom stalks of the noxious hawkweeds are now poking up from their rosettes in many locations around the valley, or they soon will be.

Controlling noxious weeds can be best thought of as promoting native or desirable plant communities. Creating the conditions that encourage natives will go a long way toward discouraging noxious weeds. As we take our spring wildflower walks, it's useful to pay attention to where our favorite flowers are found. Most of the wildflowers we love are growing among a vibrant mix of other native plants where the soils have been protected from disturbance.

On the other hand, the noxious weeds most common in the Swan Valley—spotted knapweed and oxeye daisy—are some of the first to take hold after the ground has been disturbed. They have superior ability to reclaim compacted sites and they out-compete the natives. Sometimes noxious weeds are so successful that virtually nothing else will grow in a given location.

Noxious weeds are the plants identified through the Montana County Weed Control Act as exotic species that may render land unfit for forestry, livestock, wildlife or other beneficial uses or that harm native plant communities.

It is not okay to let noxious weeds travel from our property to our neighbors' lands. We have a responsibility to control noxious weeds.

About the time we spot the tiny blue violets, which follow the yellow violets by a few weeks in our forests, we can expect to see the stems and flower heads of oxeye daisy and spotted knapweed developing along roadsides and in pastures and log deck landings. This is the best time to apply herbicides, when the plants are vigorously growing.

Developing a weed management plan is a useful exercise for landowners. This can be done by downloading an aerial photograph of your property from the Montana Cadastral Mapping Program Web site, [www.gis.mt.gov](http://www.gis.mt.gov). (*Swan Ecosystem Center can help people navigate the cadastral site.*) After printing the aerial photograph, you can sit down with a pen and draw lines around your weed infestations and formulate strategies for each weed.

A successful weed control program most likely will include multiple strategies and may or may not require herbicide treatments. Your personal economic situation and energy level will influence your plans.

Once the weeds are identified as noxious, the infestations are mapped, and the acres affected for each are calculated, planning can begin. It helps to ask yourself: Is this weed already widespread and preventing the growth of natives and desirable plants. If not, is it likely to take over? Will it spread to neighboring properties? Can I contain the weed where it is growing now? Can I reduce the size of the infestation? Is it possible to eradicate the weed from my property?

Next you can take a look at the unaffected areas, where a healthy component of natives and desirable plants are growing. Analyze why these sites are successful and consider how you might reclaim the areas infected with weeds. In the case of spotted knapweed, allowing trees to grow back can make a huge difference over time. Knapweed needs sunlight to thrive. It won't do well in the shade of a mature forest.

The next step would be to review the methods available for weed control and plan to use as many as possible—after learning the techniques affective for each weed. A weed management plan might include hand pulling, seed-head clipping, seeding or planting with natives, biological controls such as beetles that kill weeds, and other methods. If herbicides are an option, they should be used according to the manufacturer's instructions. If possible, employ a trained weed applicator or sign yourself up for a training course before spraying.

Most importantly, a weed management plan should include a strategy for prevention.

Because soil disturbance and compaction are primary causes of weed infestations, a strategy for keeping soils pliable and rich with the organic matter that supports native plants is an important step.

Weed seeds travel on the undercarriages of automobiles and ORVs, in the treads of our boots, and tangled in the fur of our pets. Keeping vehicles on roads and washing them if they have been driven in contaminated sites should be part of the plan. Brush the dog.

Another critical prevention strategy is learning to identify the recent and new invaders. These are the noxious weeds that should be eradicated as soon as they are found because they are still in small enough patches that they can be destroyed with minimal expense of dollars and energy.

The noxious orange and yellow hawkweeds are relatively new but rapidly spreading in the Swan Valley. It may be possible to stop them before they become widespread. The hawkweeds are much more problematic than knapweed and daisy. They can grow in open sunlight or in shaded forests, and they can take over by forming dense mats that completely choke out other species.

There are other new invaders lurking on our borders that we need to watch out for and plan to control. Swan Ecosystem Center is creating a new Web-based forest stewardship handbook for the Swan Valley. "Noxious Weeds" is the first chapter. You can find it at [www.SwanEcosystemCenter.org](http://www.SwanEcosystemCenter.org). Look for "Forest Stewardship" under the "Projects" drop down menu. The chapter gives advice for managing specific weeds in the Swan Valley and shows photos of some new invaders. It is funded in part by a Natural Resources and Conservation Service Conservation Innovation Grant.

There is also good information on the Missoula County Weed District Web site, [www.missoulaeduplace.org](http://www.missoulaeduplace.org), which includes weeds found in the Clearwater and Blackfoot Valleys, as well as in the Swan.

On Saturday June 13, 10 a.m. – 3 p.m., Swan Ecosystem Center is offering a free noxious weed workshop with the Missoula County Weed District that will include weed identification, weed mapping and herbicide calibration. Contact SEC to sign up at 754-3137.

At Swan Ecosystem Center, we also have pamphlets available to help people identify and control noxious weeds. And while it lasts, we have grant funding for landowners in the Swan Valley who want to control weeds.

Given all the resources available, we should be able enjoy our wildflower walks without suffering too much despair over the noxious weeds we spot along the way. After we develop our weed management plans and the blue violets have bloomed, there are scarlet paint brush and purple/blue lupine on the horizon to cheer us along.