

Purple Loosestrife (Lythrum salicaria) Fact Sheet

Purple loosestrife is a harmful exotic wetland plant that is native to Europe and Asia. Purple loosestrife was purposely introduced in eastern North America as a garden flower in the 1800s. It may also have entered with imported sheep possibly in dry ship ballast. It has a very attractive purple flower, which made it a seemingly desirable garden plant. Although lovely to look at, this exotic aquatic plant is spread easily from gardens to swampy areas, marshes, and ditches. It is aggressive and very harmful to wetlands because it crowds out the native plants and fills open spaces.

Cattails, bulrushes, grasses, and other native plants support many of the wetland animals. Cattails provide shelter, nesting and breeding spaces, and food for the animals. Purple loosestrife grows so densely that it cannot be used for shelter, nesting, or breeding. It has very few native predators; deer are one of the few animals that eat this plant. However, deer do not do enough damage to keep purple loosestrife in check.

Purple loosestrife is a beautiful plant when in bloom from July through September. It grows 2 to 7 feet tall and produces a long spike of purple-colored flowers, with 5 to 6 petals per flower. Purple loosestrife has linear-shaped leaves. It is a perennial species that develops a woody taproot with a fibrous root system, forming a dense mat.

Purple loosestrife blooms for a long time. It disperses seeds almost continuously, as each flower up the stalk matures and goes to seed. Each stalk can have 300,000 seeds. Every mature plant produces an alarming number of seeds—over 2 million! Another important factor is that the seeds are carried by the moving water and are dispersed over the entire watershed area. Seeds can remain dormant for many years (such as when they experience a hostile environment) and sprout when conditions improve. Seeds also use the usual methods of seed dispersal, such as wind and rain, cars and trucks, railroads, and animals including humans. People involved in spot control must be careful not to carry seeds on shoes and clothing when leaving the area.

This exotic aquatic plant can reproduce from roots and stem pieces as well as from seeds. On mature plants the roots can send up 30 to 50 shoots, creating a very dense growth, which chokes out other plant life. Because of the enormous numbers of seeds and root and stem replication, the purple loosestrife plant is probably impossible to eradicate and very difficult to control to an acceptable degree.

When purple loosestrife gets established in a wetland, the native plants are in short supply for the animals. This lowers the animal population and destroys the healthy balance in the area. This is a direct effect of purple loosestrife. Another impact is that if insects cannot breed in the cattail area due to a decrease in its density, some bird species will have less food and will go elsewhere. Purple loosestrife totally chokes plant life in wetlands under a sea of beautiful purple flowers. The dense stands of plants also reduce the ability to use wetlands, and rivers for recreation. Drainage ditches are unable to drain properly.