

Beautiful, but deadly

Purple loosestrife poses problem for area wetlands

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"Purple plague" awareness is growing in Farmington Hills, but not nearly as fast as the plant to which the epithet refers.

With a pretty flower that masks its aggressive, insidious nature, purple loosestrife is pushing out indigenous plants — and the animals that depend on them — from wetlands in one city park and is even showing up on neighborhood lawns, according to Joe Derek, Hills city naturalist.

Its rapid spread has caught the attention of the city's Beautification Commission, which is to study the issue in coming months, says Chairman Jeff



STAFF PHOTO BY ELIZABETH CARNEGIE

Deadly: Farmington Hills naturalist Joe Derek holds some purple loosestrife, a beautiful plant that is choking wetlands.

Lythrum salicaria, "was everywhere."

"I've seen it in a ditch that's 1-1/2 feet across and only a couple inches deep. It's showing up in people's lawns, too."

In Heritage Park, Derek says, it "has marched through all over the place."

"It's overtaking the wetlands" in the park — "the wetlands area doesn't seem to be as damp as it used to be," he says.

There are areas "where you can look for half a mile and see nothing but purple loosestrife."

A bright spot may be the city of Farmington.

Kevin Guahman, public works director, says he's received no complaints and "What we've had (of the plant) is very limited."

"Since we're 99 percent or so built up, we don't have a lot of areas where that would be a

problem," he adds.

A European import, one purple loosestrife scatters 20,000 seeds a year via air, water, fur or feathers, and a million seeds in a lifetime, Derek says.

"The plant sucks the water out of a wetland and kills (native) wetland plants, especially cattails," which "provide food for muskrats and other critters," he explains, and disrupts habitats that are home to ducks, mink and endangered plants.

"We're losing animals and plants."

Part of the problem, he says, is people: "They know that it's bad and they don't care. They like it because of what it looks like, because it's pretty."

John Steinkopf of Steinkopf Nursery, Garden Center and Landscaping, 20815 Farmington Road, says customers still ask

for the plant but "We're not selling any kind of loosestrife," even the yellow species which is indigenous to Michigan.

He says his company has returned shipments of loosestrife.

"It's so invasive, it's like quackgrass," which is worse than crabgrass, he says. "Once you get it, you can't get rid of the darn stuff."

He says the state Department of Agriculture says nurseries can sell some strains other than the purple, but hasn't officially said which ones.

"If you want color, plant more indigenous plants, ones that are native to Michigan," Steinkopf adds.

What can be done to control purple loosestrife? Burning the plant or spraying it with herbicide don't work very well.



STAFF PHOTO BY ELIZABETH CARNEGIE

Resting: A viceroy butterfly sits on top of a loosestrife to sun itself in Farmington Hills' Heritage Park.

Derek says the only thing is to "cut the flower heads off or mow them down, if you're in an area that can be mowed, or pull out the plant by the roots."

"I know that's being done in the state" by concerned people, "but how many volunteers can you get?" he asks.

If people get rid of purple loosestrife in a newly exposed area, "they may make a dent."

"But if it's in an established area, it only takes one plant" to multiply the damage — many

times," Derek says.

As for the effectiveness of doing what West Bloomfield is doing — using the galerucella beetle, which feeds on the plant's buds, leaves and stem tissue — the jury is still out, he says.

"I want to talk to a few other folks to see what luck they've had with it" before going that way, Derek says.

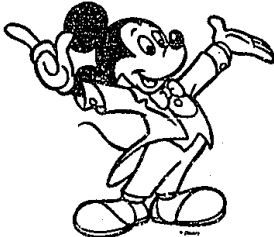
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