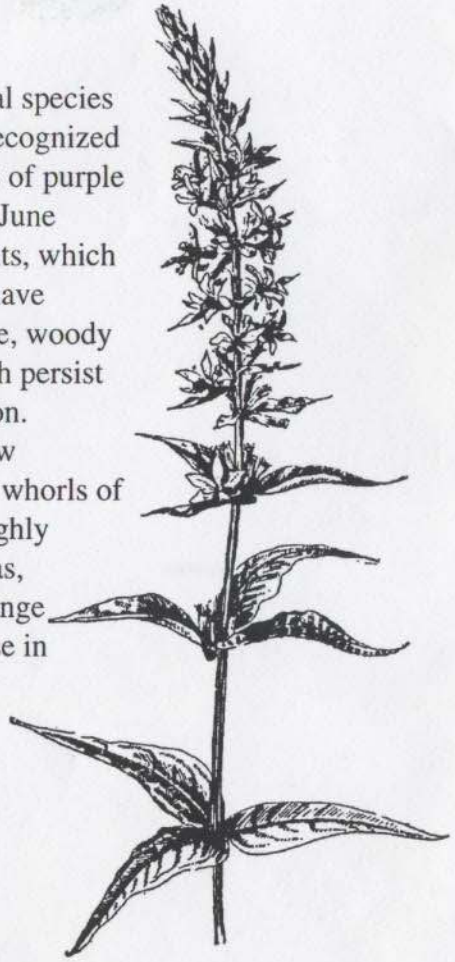
Invasive Alert

Purple Loosestrife

Lythrum salicaria



Description:

This herbaceous perennial species of loosestrife is readily recognized by its long, showy spikes of purple flowers that bloom from June through September. Plants, which grow up to 10 feet tall, have multiple (up to 50) square, woody stems and branches which persist to the next growing season. Lance-shaped leaves grow opposite each other or in whorls of three. It prefers moist, highly organic soils in open areas, but can tolerate a wide range of habitats including those in partial shade.

History:

Imported from Europe in the early 1800's, Purple Loosestrife was historically used as a medicinal herb to control dysentary and stop bleeding. Recently it has been declared a noxious weed in a number of states where its sale and growth are prohibited; however, in New England it is still available at garden centers and nurseries. It remains appealing to gardeners for its showy flowers that attract butterflies and bees. Actually some beekeepers still view it as a good late summer nectar source.

The Problem:

Purple Loosestrife is a highly aggressive invader of marshes and other wetlands where it can quickly dominate native vegetation such as cattails, severely reducing the availability of food and shelter for wildlife. Each plant can produce more than 1 million seeds that mature in August and September and remain viable for many years in wetland soils. It also reproduces vegetatively by rhizomes at a rate of about one foot per year. Soil disturbance around Purple Loosestrife only enhances its spread.

Control:

Individual plants should be pulled up and removed immediately when first noticed because it is nearly impossible to eliminate once established. Hand pulling and cutting of stems at ground level may be effective if repeated for several years, but roots should not be dug because soil disturbance enhances spreading. In some areas, burning or spot treatment with herbicides have also been effective for short term control, but in many cases plants soon become reestablished. Currently, biological control is being conducted on a limited basis through the rearing and release of two European beetles and a weevil. One of the Rhode Island experimental sites is at the Roger Williams Park Zoo in Providence where some preliminary success has been identified in the control of Purple Loosestrife.

Alternatives:

There are many alternatives including various species of Blazing Star (*Liatris*), Butterflybush (*Buddleia*), etc.

Please do not purchase the so-called "infertile" cultivars which may also produce viable seeds.

RI Wild Plant Society

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