

New Weeds to Watch for in Douglas County:

Rush Skeletonweed



A close up of the rush skeletonweed flower with notched petals. Photo Credit: Washington Noxious Weed Control Board

This is the next addition in a series of articles that introduces readers to new weed invaders in Douglas County. The weed species featured are known from only a few locations in the county, but have the potential to become wide-spread and problematic. The goal of these articles is to inform and educate Douglas County residents, so that you can help us with the early detection and rapid treatment of small weed populations before they become major issues throughout the county.

This week's weed to watch for is rush skeletonweed (*Chondrilla juncea*). Rush skeletonweed is considered one of the most problematic invasive plants in the western United States. It is native to the Mediterranean, Europe, and Central Asia and was accidentally introduced into the U.S. in the 1870s. In 2009, rush skeletonweed was estimated to have infested over 6.2 million acres spanning 15 U.S. states and two Canadian provinces.

Rush skeletonweed is a perennial herbaceous plant, meaning each individual can persist and reproduce for many years. Like other species highlighted in *New Weeds to Watch for in Douglas County*, rush skeletonweed produces a rosette (a circle of leaves close to the ground lacking a stem) early in the season with irregularly lobed leaves that are wider at the tip than they are at the base. Stems emerge and mature as the weather warms, reaching between 1-5 feet tall depending on site conditions. The stems appear leafless, and the rosette leaves wither as the stem matures, leaving a “skeleton-like” plant. A key identifying characteristic of rush skeletonweed is the stiff, coarse, downward pointing brown hairs found at the base of the stem. Small yellow flowers develop along and at the tips of each branch in mid-summer. The yellow petals are squared off and notched at the tip. Another key identifying characteristic is that the plant will exude a milky latex-like substance if cut or broken. Rush skeletonweed may be confused with the native skeletonplant (*Lygodesmia juncea*), but is easily distinguished by its yellow flowers. The native has purple flowers and lacks the downward pointing brown hairs at the base of the stem.



The stiff, coarse, downward pointing brown hairs found at the base of the stem. Photo Credit: A. Rosenblum

Rush skeletonweed reproduces by seed dispersal and through its root system. A mature plant produces between 1,500 and 20,000 “dandelion like” seeds that are easily spread by the wind. The plant’s deep tap root will also grow lateral roots that send up shoots, which then become new plants. An infestation may spread by as much as two feet each year through its lateral roots.



The native skeletonplant, *Lygodesmia juncea*. Photo credit: Ben Legler

Rush skeletonweed is commonly found on roadsides, rangeland, pastures, shrub steppe, cropland, abandoned cropland, or any other disturbed location. It prefers sunny locations with coarse-textured, well drained, deep soils, but it can also be found in our shallow soils.

In rangeland and shrub steppe habitat, the impacts of rush skeletonweed invasion include reduced habitat and forage values through the displacement of native and beneficial species. In cropland, production and quality of crops decrease and weed management costs increase. Rush skeletonweed can be difficult to control in cropland because cultivation may lead to the spread of root fragments capable of producing new plants.

Foster Creek Conservation District is leading the development of the Douglas County Cooperative Weed Management Area, and has funding to assist landowners with the control of rush skeletonweed as well as the other weeds featured in this series of articles. If you believe you have rush skeletonweed on your land please contact Aaron Rosenblum at 509-423-5990 or at arosenblum@fostercreekcd.org; or Dale Whaley with the WSU Extension at 509 745-8531, ext. 6352.



The entire rush skeletonweed plant. Photo credit: Washington Noxious Weed Control Board