

Weeds to Watch for in Douglas County:

Hoary Alyssum



A close up of the flowers of hoary alyssum. Photo Credit: WA Noxious Weed Control Board

Weeds to Watch for in Douglas County is a series of articles that provide information on weeds that have been identified as priority species by the Douglas County Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA) Steering Committee. The goal of these articles is to enable Douglas County residents to identify these species, know why it is important to control them, and what to do if they find them.

The featured species of this article is hoary alyssum (*Berteroa incana*). Hoary alyssum is in the CWMA's highest priority group of species because it is not yet present in Douglas County, but is expected to be in the near future. Early detection and rapid treatment of any new small populations is essential, as hoary alyssum has the potential to become a major issue throughout the county.

Hoary alyssum is a member of the mustard family, and is native to east-central Europe and western Asia. It was likely introduced with contaminated seed, and is now widespread across much of North America. According to a 2018 distribution map from the Washington State Department of Agriculture, hoary alyssum is found in four of the five surrounding counties, with more than 1000 acres infested in Okanogan County.

Hoary alyssum is commonly found in pastures, rangelands, rights of way, vacant lots and any other waste areas. Plants are found on dry, well drained soils, such as sands and gravel, and are tolerant of hot dry summers. This species thrives in disturbed areas, quickly out-competing native plants and spreading through stressed and degraded sites.

Hoary alyssum is particularly worrisome to livestock owners. Contamination levels of greater than 30% can cause severe toxicity or death in horses. All other grazing animals simply reject these plants, which puts greater pressure on palatable species and contributes to hoary alyssum's continued spread throughout the pasture. Similarly, it reduces wildlife habitat values through the displacement of native and beneficial species.



A pasture infested with hoary alyssum. Photo Credit: WA Noxious Weed Control Board

This species can be an annual (completes lifecycle in a single year), biennial (completes its lifecycle over two years) or a short-lived perennial (completes its lifecycle over a few years) if it is cut or mowed. Plants initially develop a rosette following seed germination, which is a circle of leaves close to the ground that lack a stem. These leaves are oblong and wider at the tip than at the base. All surfaces of hoary alyssum are covered with small hairs that give the plant a silver-gray appearance.



Flowers and seed pods of hoary alyssum. Photo Credit: WA Noxious Weed Control Board

Hoary alyssum flowers bloom from early spring to late fall. Flowering stems are generally 1 – 3.5 feet tall and produce a cluster of small white blooms at the top. Each flower has 4 petals that are deeply cleft, giving it the appearance of having 8 petals. Seeds are enclosed in small semi-inflated pods that are about 1/4 inch in diameter ovoid to ellipsoid in shape. The style (female reproductive portion of the flower) is persistent, giving the seed pod a long, skinny appendage on the end. Reproduction is through seed only, and seeds are thought to be spread long distances on vehicles, machinery and in contaminated soil and gravel.

There are a few simple preventive measures that can be taken to help keep hoary alyssum out of Douglas County. Folks who purchase livestock feed from surrounding counties should talk with their suppliers about possible weed seed contamination, and if possible, inspect cutting fields. A list of certified weed free forage providers can be found on the Washington Department of Agriculture's website at <https://agr.wa.gov/PlantsInsects/WWHAM/WWHAM.aspx>. Folks who farm, transfer machinery, or travel off-road in surrounding counties are encouraged to inspect and thoroughly wash the undercarriage and wheels of vehicles. Finally, inspect your land for weeds regularly, small infestations are much easier to treat than large ones.

The Douglas County Cooperative Weed Management Area is offering to assist landowners with the control of hoary alyssum, as well as the other CWMA priority weed species. If you believe you have hoary alyssum on your land please contact Aaron Rosenblum, Foster Creek Conservation District, at 509-423-5990 or at arosenblum@fostercreekcd.org; or Dale Whaley with the WSU Extension at 509 745-8531, ext. 6352. More information on the Douglas County CWMA and other priority weed species can be found at <http://www.fostercreekcd.org/programs/douglas-county-cooperative-weed-management-area/>.