

Woodland management – control of rhododendron and cherry laurel

There are a number of species of plant which have been introduced to the British Isles and which, if left unchecked, can become very invasive and result in significant loss of biodiversity. The cost of controlling such species is high and it is therefore all the more important to prevent them from spreading.

Rhododendron *Rhododendron ponticum*

Rhododendrons are evergreen shrubs from the Ericaceae family (the same family as heather) and were introduced to Britain in the 18th century. They were planted in gardens for their attractive flowers but also on heathland and in woodlands to provide cover for game birds. There are several hundred species of rhododendron, but only *R. ponticum* is invasive: this species has adapted exceptionally well to our climate and is very good at spreading through wind-borne seeds (one plant can produce several thousand seeds every year) and through vegetative means. It is a problem because it is very good at spreading, but also because it is evergreen and no woodland flora will grow underneath it, which in turns prevents any woodland regeneration. It also appears to provide habitat or food for very few species, if any. Once established, it is very difficult to eradicate and control measures usually need to be implemented over several years to have an effect.

Control measures

- cut during the winter (September to March), focussing on older, seed-bearing bushes first, and follow up with stump treatment immediately. Seeds

dispersal tends to be very low, generally within a few metres of the bush, and research shows that destroying the oldest/core plant is more effective than starting at the edge of the infested area and dealing with younger plants and seedlings.

- pull up any seedlings if they come out easily and dig out any plants manually where feasible (don't leave any roots behind)
- treat young bushes, any regrowth from stumps and any remaining seedlings with a foliar spray mixed with an adjuvant (this breaks down the waxy layer on the surface of the leaf) between May to October. Research seems to show that these sprays are most effective on younger bushes that are less than 1.3m tall.
- treat mature bushes with a stem injection treatment, if available. If not, then apply a foliar spray as for other younger bushes.
- burn the cuttings but make sure you limit the number of fire sites since any bare ground created will result in more sites being available for the seeds to take hold
- some removal of toxic leaf litter may be required since nothing else will grow there

Many herbaceous species can be adversely affected by the herbicides which are used on rhododendron and you may need to wait until vulnerable species are dormant to use any chemical control.

This sheet includes information about the following topics:

- rhododendron
- cherry laurel
- implications of using herbicides
- protected species
- funding
- references and further reading
- further advice



Rhododendron in flower © I.Rickards



Rhododendron taking over © I.Rickards



Clearing cherry laurel by cutting
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Cherry laurel *Prunus laurocerasus* (L.)

Cherry laurel poses problems similar to rhododendron: it is evergreen and shade-tolerant and has adapted well to our climate. Livestock and other animals such as invertebrates find it unpalatable (it contains cyanide) and so it tends to grow unchecked. In time, it will shade out any woodland understorey and prevent woodland regeneration.

Control measures as per rhododendron. Please note that the cyanide compounds present in cherry laurel are broken down when it is being burnt at high temperatures and therefore do not pose a threat to human health (beyond normal risks associated with wood smoke).

Using herbicides on your site

- we recommend that you always use a contractor with an appropriate Certificate of Competence to ensure that you are following the *Code of Practice for the Safe Use of Pesticides on Farms and Holdings [PB3528]* or DEFRA's *Code of Practice for using Plant Protection Products*
- all operatives working on the site must wear adequate personal protective equipment and adhere to all health and safety requirements set out in law or regulation, in particular The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992

- use selective herbicides in preference to non-selective ones to avoid destroying non-target species
- if the site is designated (eg a Site of Special Scientific Interest) or in a government scheme such as the Environmental Stewardship Scheme, you will need to follow guidelines set out in any agreements

Protected species

A number of species such as the hazel dormice, breeding birds, great crested newts and all bat species are protected by law and you need to make sure that you are complying with all relevant regulations before doing any habitat management work. A good place to start for more information is to look at the Natural England Protected Species List and Frequently Asked Questions webpages, available for download from here: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk>. Alternatively, contact your local Natural England office and explain what surveys or management work you are planning to do.

Funding

The Woodland Improvement Grant and the Woodland Management Grant cover various aspects of woodland management including invasives. For details, please go to their website: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/ewgs>. However, please note that, for some grants, the woodland needs to have a certified management plan.



Fruiting cherry laurel © A. Waite

Further reading and references

Forestry Commission Practice Guides

on a wide range of topics are available to download for free or buy a hard copy. Call Forestry Commission Publications on 0161 495 4845 or look online at <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/publications.nsf/>

Forestry Commission

Forest Research <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-63JJVS>

Edwards, C. and Taylor, S. L. (2008)

A survey and appraisal of Rhododendron invasion in Argyll and Bute. Forest Research.

Edwards, C. (2006)

Managing and controlling invasive rhododendron. Forestry Commission Practice Guide. Forestry Commission, Edinburgh. i-iv + 1-36 pp. Crown copyright.

Small Woodland Owners' Group

website and monthly newsletter with information about woodland management, events, contacts and much more www.swog.org.uk

The Conservation Volunteers

Woodlands: a practical handbook and other handbooks available to buy from <http://store.tcv.org.uk/>

Obtaining further advice

For further information, please contact the Trust's Land Management Advice Service by calling 01622 662012 or by emailing info@kentwildlife.org.uk



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