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Woad Rage

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GARDEN NOTES

WOAD RAGE

By Dennis Hinkamp

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It is amazing that some weeds have so much determination and desire to survive. Wouldn't it be great if we could breed some of this tenacity and stubbornness into a few of our wimpy perennials?

It is ironic that some of our most noxious weeds were initially thought to be attractive and beneficial, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist.

Currently, we have a large problem with a plant introduced here to produce a dark blue dye, he says. This is the notorious dyer's woad (*Isatis tinctoria* L.). The leaves can be used by dyer's to make a blue or black-blue dye.

"Dyer's woad has invaded our foothills and valleys and is currently moving into large landscapes and empty lots," Goodspeed says. "This weed will become quite obvious in the next weeks, as the foothills turn yellow with dyer's woad blossoms. The problem appears to be growing worse despite many efforts to slow its progress."

A major problem with dyer's woad is its invasive nature, he explains. Not native to the area, it was introduced from Europe in colonial times and has few natural enemies to slow its progress. As it invades an area, it crowds out native plants, crops, rangelands and pastures. Dyer's woad damage in and around Utah currently exceeds \$2 million a year.

Dyer's woad is classified as a winter annual, biennial or short-lived perennial, Goodspeed says. Break off the top of the plant, and it has the ability to regenerate from the crown. It produces many dark purple and black seeds that germinate in either the spring or fall. The plant first forms a rosette, then overwinters and bolts the following spring into a two- to four-foot plant. The leaves are bluish-green in appearance.

"The best control method for dyer's woad is digging or hand-pulling them out of the ground," he says. "This is difficult, time-consuming work. It is believed that the weed has a root system that is not only deep, but has the ability to grab onto rocks for an anchor, making it almost impossible to pull out. I doubt this is true, but I know some plants that are particularly stubborn."

"In a small area, where the plants are just beginning to establish, it is especially important to get them dug and removed as early as they are detected," he adds. "If nothing else is done, at least remove the flowers before the plant goes to seed. Controlling one plant now is easier than

controlling a hundred next year. Small area infestations can be tilled in the fall to kill the plant in the rosette stage. Early spring tilling is also effective if done before the plant begins to bolt.”

Dyer’s woad can also be controlled by using herbicides, Goodspeed says. Those available to homeowners include 2,4-D and glyphosate (Round-up and related products). Timing of the application is critical. In the early spring, dyer’s woad is most susceptible at the rosette stage. As the plant begins to bolt and flower, it is less susceptible to herbicides, so the best treatment then is hand digging.

It will take a lot of work and effort to control dyer’s woad and reclaim the foothills, he says. If people work together to eliminate this weed on their own property, it will do a lot to cut down on the seed production and rapid spread.

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office.](#)

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