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Wicked Weeds of the West

STORY AND PHOTO BY KATE DEWEY, BLUEWATER DUNES

“Wicked Weeds of the West” is how rancher Wayne Slaght in Powell County, Montana refers to spotted knapweed (*centaurea macubsa*). Wayne owns 10,000 acres of rangeland and 800 cattle and considers spotted knapweed to be the greatest threat to ranchers, costing them millions of dollars and putting some out of business within 10 years.*

Don't be taken in by the attractiveness of spotted knapweed's pink flower. It and another invasive plant, white sweet clover, are both now threatening Tiny beaches and farms.

Spotted knapweed was introduced to Turtle Island, an Indigenous term for North America, in ships' ballast, in 1883, via Victoria, Vancouver Island. Since then it has scattered itself across the continent and become a scourge to sensitive environments, farm and range land, and native species. It originated in Europe and parts of Asia.

The roots of spotted knapweed exude a chemical, catechin, which weakens and often destroys the roots of adjacent plants. One plant can produce 400-25,000 seeds, viable for five years, which can be spread onto beaches and dunes, farms and private property by vehicle tires, shoes and clothing, boats and other watercraft, rivers, waterways, lakes, deer and sheep manure, and contaminated animal feed, posing a threat to native plants, forage and other crops, livestock and wildlife.

There are two weevils that feast on the plant, which may be a better choice than pesticides for farmers. One weevil prefers the flowers; the other, the roots. They can be purchased online at <https://tinyurl.com/knapweed1>

The invasive species article from Severn Sound Environmental Association on page 11 refers to volunteers pulling up 30 yard-waste bags of this plant last year in the Lafontaine Beach area. In the same year, I pulled as much spotted knapweed and white sweet clover from Bluewater Dunes and neighbourhood roads and ditches and advised many residents who had stopped to ask what I was doing to check their own property for both spotted knapweed and white sweet clover, another invasive species brought into North America at a much earlier date. Since it has the same nitrogen fixing properties as its cousin, alfalfa, it continues to be used on many farms.

The seeds are often included in “wildflower” seed packages. Please check the labels and/or contact the provider to ensure they do not include any invasive species.

White sweet clover roots exude a chemical similar to

spotted knapweed and also weaken the roots of native and crop plants.

White sweet clover is a biannual plant that can grow above 12ft high and often has deep roots. I have used a saw to fell some of these stubborn plants. One plant can produce up to 35,000 seeds that can stay viable for 80 years. It spread in the same manner as spotted knapweed.

Both plants bloom between July and September. Spotted knapweed prefers dry and sterile ground, gravel, sandy and sunny locations. White sweet clover can be found in similar domains and ditches. They can deprive others of sunlight and spotted knapweed has an eerie ability to mimic and hide among adjacent plants. It changes form at different stages of growth.

These plants pose an especial threat to Tiny's beaches and dunes as the native plant species, whose roots stabilize the sand, can be crowded out.

If you find white sweet clover and/or spotted knapweed in your neighbourhood and/or on your own property before it has gone to seed, please pull it up and cram it into yard-waste bags for pickup.

If you need help in identifying and removing invasive species, contact Maggie Off at m.off@tinycottager.org. There are groups of volunteers who have expertise in this task.

For more information and photos, visit the Invasive Species section on the Federation's website, www.tinycottager.org.

* Source: Joe Alper <https://tinyurl.com/alper1>



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