Purple Loosestrife - What a Beautiful Weed!

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Purple Loosestrife or Lythrum, *Lythrum salicaria*, is a showy perennial often sown or transplanted in landscapes across Nevada. Unfortunately, it self-sows very freely with a seeding rate of more than a billion seeds per acre. In the east and northwest, the plant has been banned as a troublesome, even noxious weed that invades wetlands, waterways, and seeps choking out other species. Most recently, authorities in Utah have recognized its weedy nature. Utah Extension has removed it from its lists of recommended flowering perennials and the Utah Association of Nurserymen is recommending it be removed from nursery shelves. Five counties in Utah are seriously infested with Purple Loosestrife which often proliferates and becomes so dense that water flow in canals and ditches is impeded. This has not happened yet in Nevada, but the potential exists.

Nevada Cooperative Extension is following suit and is NOT RECOMMENDING Purple Loosestrife be planted. It should be removed from borders and perennial beds where it exists. Seeds from established plants may be carried by birds, animals and running water, particularly through storm drain systems, into nearby uninfested streams and wetlands. Lythrum enthusiasts may suggest keeping the plant and recommending the gardener remove the flowers as cut flower before they go to seed. Likewise, many suggest the cultivars and unimproved hybrids offered in nurseries do not produce seed as readily as the species itself. In the long run, either approach in justifying keeping the plant may be folly. First, if not all the flowers are harvested, or one moves and leaves the plant behind and the new owners are not aware of Lythrum's weediness, seeds will be produced. In the second case, seeds of cultivars and hybrids may produce offspring with the tremendous seed producing capacity of the species. The second generation would then perpetuate the weed.

Nurseries that are presently selling Purple Loosestrife should discontinue doing so. The economic gain by a few is not worth the risk of introducing this weedy species into wetlands, streams and watercourses throughout Nevada.

Purple Loosestrife is a flowering perennial which grows three to eight feet tall. Originally from Europe, it has naturalized in many locales across North America. Two other Lythrum, *L. californicum* and *L. alatum* are found in several western states and are potential weedy perennials similar to Purple Loosestrife, *L. salicaria*.

Lythrum have been recommended for many areas of Nevada because they thrive in full sun and tolerate a host of soil conditions, including acid or alkaline and dry irrigated sites to moist environments, where it does best. It is hardy and performs year after year with predictable results. Rose-purple, one-inch flowers with five to seven petals are borne in one-foot long spike-like flower clusters at the ends of each stalk. Seeds mature rapidly shortly after flowering and are quickly dispersed. Pink and rose cultivars are available, even dwarf forms that only reach 15" to 18" are popular.

The leaves grow opposite each other along the stems. Sometimes they form with three leaves at each node instead of two. The leaves have smooth edges, are narrowly elongated to a pointed tip, and are two to four inches long. Their base is rounded or heart-shaped and commonly surround or clasp the stem. The root system is tough and woody which makes it difficult to cut apart, but at the same time ensures its survival under severe soil conditions. The plant produces rhizomes or underground stems that spread out under the soil and eventually form new plants from the original. This increases its weedy potential. Gardeners often share the plant by dividing the root system in spring or fall or separating the newly formed plants from the original. Rooted stem cuttings are also passed to neighbors. Become familiar with Purple Loosestrife (Figure 1) to avoid accepting it as a gift or purchasing it in the nursery. Likewise, if you recognize it in your garden, remove it. If it is in your neighbors garden, share this fact sheet with them and encourage its removal.

The cultivar "Morden Pink" may serve as an acceptable substitute. This rose-pink cultivar which originated at the Dominion Experiment Station in Morden, Manitoba, Canada is a mutation of *Lythrum virgatum* that is sterile or seedless and consequently is not as great a threat to become a weed. It grows vigorously and clumps increase rapidly in size. Three foot tall, it forms a tightly compact plant which produces trim spikes of flowers nearly all summer long. It also tolerates wet and dry sites if water is available periodically in perennial borders and naturalized areas.
Lythrum salicaria


References


