

## May is Time to Control Leafy Spurge

**Tom Dorn**  
UNL Extension Educator

In my travels around the county, I have seen many patches of leafy spurge. Leafy spurge is a noxious weed according to the Nebraska Seed Law and the Nebraska Noxious Weed Law. Leafy spurge is found primarily on untilled land such as pastures, range, roadsides, woodlands and farmsteads. It is mildly poisonous to cattle and can effectively ruin the carrying capacity of patches where it is growing because cattle soon learn to avoid grazing near it.

### Identification

Leafy spurge is a persistent, deep-rooted perennial which

reproduces by seeds and roots. Leafy spurge has a somewhat woody crown below the soil surface. Each crown area produces several upright stems giving the plant a clump-like appearance. In addition, new stems arise from buds on lateral, secondary roots. Stem growth starts in April, making leafy spurge an early, vigorous competitor with forage and pasture plants.

The plant bears numerous linear-shaped leaves with smooth margins. See Figure 1. Leaves have a bluish-green color but turn yellowish or reddish-orange in late-summer. If you are not certain whether the weed you are looking at with long narrow leaves is leafy spurge, Marestalk or some other weed, pull a leaf off of

Spring applied herbicides are more effective when applied on plants with developing true flowers.

the plant or break the stem. If a very white sap oozes from the wound, it is leafy spurge.

Leafy spurge produces a flat-topped cluster of yellowish-green, petal-like structures called bracts, which bear the true spurge flowers. The showy, yellow bracts appear in May and gives the plant a "blooming" appearance. The true spurge flowers, however, develop about 10 days later and have small, green bracts. See Figure 2. The distinction between yellow bract appearance and true flowering is important for timing herbicide applications. Spring applied herbicides are more effective when applied on plants with developing true flowers.

Seeds are borne in pods which contain three gray-brown, sometimes speckled, oblong, smooth seeds. At maturity, the pods pop open,



Figure 2 — Leafy spurge bracket and flowers  
(To see photos in color, go to <http://lanaster.unl.edu/nebline/2009/apr09>)

throwing seeds up to 15 feet from the parent plant. About 140 seeds are produced per stem and seeds may remain viable in the soil for up to eight years. Leafy spurge peak germination time is late-April to early-May. New seedlings develop throughout the summer but usually do not flower during the first year. Leafy spurge seedlings can vegetatively reproduce from root buds within 7–10 weeks after germination.

### Control

Chemical control recommendations listed in the UNL Extension publication *2009 Guide for Weed Management* (EC 09-130) include:

- 2,4-D (4L) at 2 quarts per acre at flower bud stage (for suppression of seed production — annual treatments necessary).
- Grazon P+D at 2 quarts per acre at flower bud stage (for suppression of seed production and gradual stand reduction over several years).
- Tordon 22K at 1-2 quarts per acre (retreatment necessary for several years).
- Overdrive 4 ounces + Tordon + 16 ounces per acre.

Spot treatment of seedlings and shoots emerging from deep root buds will be necessary for many years after a stand appears to be controlled. Always follow label directions.



Figure 1 — Leafy spurge leaves and milky sap

## Recognize/Control Phragmites

**Tom Dorn**  
UNL Extension Educator

Phragmites (also known as common reed) has recently been added to the Nebraska Noxious Weed list. It is an aggressive invader of areas with saturated soil, including ponds, road ditches, terrace channels and along streams and rivers. Phragmites plants range from 6–15 feet in height, yet 80 percent of the plant is contained below ground in a dense mass of roots and rhizomes penetrating the soil to a depth greater than six feet.

In the summer months, Phragmites' flat, gray-green leaves are 2–2.5 inches wide and 8–15 inches long and alternate side to side along the stem. The seed head is a purplish-brown color when it emerges in late-July. The feathery seed heads are soft and almost silky to the touch in the summer months. The heads are generally 6–20 inches long and up to eight inches wide with many branches (see figure 1).

In the fall, the plant turns a tan color and most of the leaves drop off, leaving only the stalk and plume-topped shoot commonly seen throughout winter (see Figure 2). Each mature plant can produce as many as 2,000 seeds annually. New stands of Phragmites develop from seed which is spread by water movement or wind. Once established in a



Overwintered phragmites in May — height ranges 6–15 feet

good location for growth, the greatest expansion of new plants are from new shoots coming from the extensive network of rhizomes.

The Lancaster County Noxious Weed Control Authority has plotted over 70 locations with Phragmites infestation in the county and more locations are being added to the map as they are discovered. The county weed control began an aggressive control program in 2008 using Habitat or aquatic glyphosate products.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the Weed Control Authority at 441-7817 or stop in the extension office, 444 Cherrycreek Road, and ask for the *Landowners Guide For Controlling Phragmites*.



Phragmites seed heads

## Getting the Most Out of CRP

USDA regulations now allow you to use some CRP fields as pasture or hay periodically. To make the most of this opportunity, Dr. Bruce Anderson, UNL extension forage specialist, gave the following advice on his Forage Minute radio spot.

"For years, the only time you could use CRP was in an emergency, and then it often was so late you got little good from it. Times have changed, though, so many of you can actually plan on using the forage grown on CRP fields.

Look at what kind of feed currently is available from most fields. Then imagine what it will be like after July 15, when use can begin. In most cases, much old dead trash exists so yield of new green growth will be low and weeds may be a problem.

One of the best ways to improve yield and quality of CRP forage is a prescribed burn in the spring. This removes old, dead trash, promotes new, green growth and controls some weeds and trees. Be sure you can burn both safely and legally, though, before you try it.

Weed control options will vary based on the weed problems in your CRP. Thistles and broad-leaves often are controlled best using herbicides like Grazon and Milestone. For specific recommendations, visit your local extension office or review options in our new weed management guide.

Most CRP fields have had no fertilizer for many years, so yields often increase nicely when nitrogen, and sometimes phosphorus fertilizers are applied. I wouldn't spend money on fertilizer, though, until you have removed the old, dead growth and have controlled most of the weeds.

Think ahead. Can hay or pasture from your CRP fields improve your livestock program? Take care of it so it can work for you."