

Purple Loosestrife: Beautiful or Damaging?

Vibrant stands of purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) are starting to be seen in wetland areas and on lake shores in Hawthorn Woods, and are known for their dramatic display of shades of purple. Unfortunately, this beautiful showpiece is actually an aggressive invasive plant that severely disrupts water flow in wetlands, lakes, and causes a sharp decline in biodiversity.

Dense stands of purple loosestrife aggressively crowd out native vegetation, thereby threatening the life cycle of native waterfowl, amphibians, flowers, and other wetland species in Hawthorn Woods. Habitats where fish and wildlife feed, seek shelter, reproduce and rear young, can quickly become choked under a sea of these purple flowers.

Purple loosestrife is one of the most “unwanted” invasive plants impacting wetland environments. In fact, invasive plants are the second greatest threat to biodiversity after habitat loss, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Purple loosestrife is a wetland perennial, and is considered extremely noxious. Purple loosestrife is found in wet areas at low to mid-elevation levels, growing in ditches, irrigation canals, marshes, streams, wetland shorelines, and shallow ponds.

Often confused with fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*), purple loosestrife is an escaped ornamental that tolerates a wide range of weather conditions and will grow in standing water. Shrub-like in appearance, purple loosestrife has stiff, four-sided stems ending in dense spikes of striking purple flowers. Plants have narrow, stalk less leaves and can grow up to several feet in height at maturity.

Purple loosestrife readily forms dense, impenetrable stands that are unsuitable as cover, food, or nesting sites for a wide range of native wetland animals. Wetlands lose 50-100% of their native biomass due to purple loosestrife invasions.

Purple loosestrife is highly competitive due to ample seed production, giving it an advantage over native plant species. Seeds distribute easily through wind, water, people, and animals. A single plant produces over 2.5 million seeds that drop in early fall when temperatures cool. This plant is also able to re-sprout from roots and broken stems that fall to the ground or into the water.

What can be done?

In order to help Hawthorn Woods protect our resources, residents can help by preventing the establishment of purple loosestrife and managing any existing infestations. In addition, residents can consider replacing the purple loosestrife with other flowers such as the red cardinal flower, a hummingbird magnet. Another option might be the stately Queen-of-the-Prairie, a lovely native plant that is listed as threatened in Illinois. Along with the Milkweed plant, these replacements will create a sustainable habitat for the Monarch Butterfly.



Invasive Purple Loosestrife



Red Cardinal Flower

If the Village can be of assistance,
please contact the
Hawthorn Woods
Public Works Department
at 847-847-5227.



Queen-of-the-Prairie Flower

