



Fireweed

Senecio madagascariensis

DECLARED CLASS 2

Fireweed is an introduced weed that competes strongly with pasture species and is toxic to livestock. It is responsible for illness, slow growth and poor conditioning of cattle and can result in death.

The best control for fireweed incorporates integrated management strategies, including herbicides and mechanical methods in addition to vigorous permanent pastures that can compete strongly with fireweed seedlings.



Description

Fireweed is an annual or a short-lived perennial. It is a daisy-like herb that can vary greatly in size and shape depending on environmental conditions. In dry, harsh conditions it may be less than 20 cm tall with narrow leaves, no branching and few flowers. In ideal conditions fireweed will grow to 50 cm tall with multiple branches, long wide leaves (6 cm x 2 cm) and about 100 flowers.

The leaves are alternate, dark green, have serrated margins, and are usually 2–6 cm long. The flowers are bright yellow, daisy-like with a diameter of approximately 2 cm and produce up to 100 seeds each. It is very similar to a range of native *Senecio* species.

Seeds are small, cylindrical in shape, and 2–3 mm long. Each seed has rows of very fine short hairs and a silky pappus (parachute). Flowers and seeds are produced continuously over the growing season. An average plant can produce over 10 000 seeds during this time.

Fireweed has a shallow branched tap root with many fibrous roots. The shallow roots often allow plants to fall over in wind. When this happens the stem will sprout roots wherever it remains touching the ground.

The problem

Fireweed is a weed of both arable country and rangelands. It can dominate pastures and is toxic, particularly to cattle and horses. Heavy infestations of fireweed often result from two principal causes:

- neglect of steadily increasing fireweed infestations in previous years,
- lack of good ground cover caused by overgrazing, drought, fire or slashing.

Poisoning

Unless fireweed poisoning is severe it can be difficult to detect because the symptoms, such as reduced weight gain and/or low milk production, can have a variety of causes.

Symptoms of more severe poisoning are loss of appetite, aimless wandering, loss of co-ordination, sensitivity to sunlight, jaundice and abdominal straining with rectal eversion. Severe poisoning will result in death and an autopsy will reveal chronic liver sclerosis.

All growth stages contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids that damage the liver. Fireweed is toxic when green or dry therefore contaminated hay or silage may be toxic.

Fireweed is generally unpalatable to cattle, so poisoning is most likely to occur when fireweed plants are dense and stock can not feed selectively, or when there is a shortage of pasture and hungry stock are less selective about food.

Sheep and goats are less susceptible to fireweed poisoning and can graze in fireweed infested paddocks for at least one season. Toxins found in

fireweed are able to taint the milk of goats that graze this plant. Goats for milk production should not be allowed to graze in fireweed infested paddocks.

Life cycle

Fireweed can be an annual but many plants do survive through the summer so plants of all ages can be present at the same time.

Seeds germinate in mild, warm conditions (15°C – 27°C) in the presence of light and moisture. Most seedlings appear between March and June then grow quickly to produce their first flowers in 6–10 weeks.

Fireweed usually begins to die back in spring. The top growth dies, leaving the base and the roots which can last through the summer and re-grow in the following autumn. Depending on rainfall some plants continue to grow and produce flowers and seed through summer.

A dry summer followed by autumn or winter rains leads to heavy fireweed infestations.

Habitat and distribution

Fireweed is native to Madagascar and southern Africa and was first recorded in Australia in the Hunter Valley in 1918. It is not known how it was introduced but it could have been brought in privately as a garden plant. It spread slowly at first but in the last 30 years it has rapidly increased its range, most likely aided by modern transport and rural practices.

Present distribution

Fireweed is a weed of beef and dairy pasture east of the Great Dividing Range and is currently established along the entire New South Wales coast and north to Brisbane.

Isolated infestations have been found near Caboolture, Cooroy, Belli Park, Maleny, Yandina, Pelican Waters and as far north as Gympie.

Potential distribution

Fireweed is spreading northward and has the potential to infest extensive areas of valuable pasture north of Brisbane. A prediction based on climate and land use, suggests that fireweed has the potential to be a serious pest as far north as Rockhampton.

Even light infestations of fireweed can produce 1 000 000 seeds per hectare. Seeds are light and have a pappus that enables them to be carried by the wind. The seeds also have rows of short hairs that can loosely cling to animals. Fireweed can be spread short distances by wind and stock. However, it is spread greater distances in pasture seed, hay, turf, mulch and with stock transport. Fireweed seed can also be spread as a contaminant in transported materials such as hydromulch and grass seed.

Declaration details

Fireweed is a declared Class 2 plant under the *Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route Management) Act 2002*. A **Class 2** pest is one that has already spread over substantial areas of Queensland, but its impact is so serious that we need to try and **control** it and avoid further spread onto properties that are still free of the pest. By law, all landholders must try to keep their land free of Class 2 pests and it is an offence to keep or sell these pests without a permit. A Local Government may serve a notice upon a landholder requiring control of declared pests.

Control

The spread of weeds threatens the sustainability of agriculture and other land uses. Weeds also devastate native plants and animals.

The best form of weed control is prevention. Always treat weed infestations when small, do not allow weeds to establish. Weed control is not cheap, but it is cheaper now than the next year. Proper planning ensures you get value for each dollar spent.

Look at your weed problem carefully. Can you realistically eradicate it? Should you contain the weed to stop new infestations developing while you reduce existing ones? What are you required to do by legislation? How does weed control fit into your property plan? What can you do to restore areas and prevent re-establishment?

The best approach is usually to combine different methods. Control may include chemical and mechanical methods combined with land management changes. The control methods you choose should suit the specific weed and your particular situation.

Management strategies

The best approach to fireweed control is to prevent it establishing by ensuring that there is a dense cover of pasture in autumn and winter. Waiting until autumn to begin pasture improvement will worsen the fireweed problem because fireweed, which germinates in autumn, will be promoted ahead of the pasture by fertilising and direct drilling of winter pasture species.

When small infestations of fireweed are identified, **act immediately** to prevent the situation from becoming worse and to increase the likelihood of eradication.

Mechanical control

Chip out, bag and burn any isolated plants or dispose of them at council approved land fill tips. You should not burn any toxic plants in household wood burning stoves or heaters. Remove chipped-out plants from paddocks because they may still set seed and poison stock.

Slashing

Slashing is usually **not effective** as it may lead to increased stock poisoning. Slashing tends to give a good visual effect because it removes the flowers but at best it delays flowering and seeding and at worst it damages the pasture, making conditions more favourable for fireweed.

Fireweed remains toxic after being cut and becomes more attractive to stock and thus more likely to cause poisoning.

Herbicide control

Herbicides are most effective if sprayed before plants reach maturity. However, application during flowering will be effective if higher recommended rates of herbicide are applied.

Research is ongoing at the Alan Fletcher Research Station for herbicide controls against fireweed including residual control methods. Trials have shown herbicide application in the autumn period during April provides good control. Before undertaking such programs landholders are advised to determine the infestation levels.

Table 1 details herbicides registered for fireweed control. Before using any herbicide always read the label carefully. All herbicides must be applied strictly according to the directions on the label.

An effective application method in an open pasture situation is a boom spray. Follow this up by spot spraying or pulling and bagging any regrowth or missed plants.

Boom spraying is also suitable for follow-up treatments, as it allows destruction of immature plants which may otherwise grow to re-seed the area before they can be noticed.

Bromoxynil, trade names Bromicide 200, Brominil 200 and Bucril 200, is suitable for use in pastures containing clovers, medics and lucerne, and it will not affect grass.

Bromoxynil is effective if used on seedlings, which usually appear in autumn and early winter but may appear later following rain. Twice as much bromoxynil is needed if it is applied to plants that are just beginning to flower. Bromoxynil is less effective on mature plants, as it is a contact herbicide only. Mature plants will only be killed off where the bromoxynil comes into contact with the plant, allowing recovery of the plant from lower, untouched portions.

Unfortunately fireweed control is often not considered until the highly visible flowers appear and it is too late for effective control with herbicide.

Biological control

A number of organisms can be found attacking fireweed, but any effect they have is temporary and isolated. An orange rust, *Puccinia lagenophorae*, is common and often affects fireweed particularly in lower country. The blue stem borer moth, (*Patagoniodes farinari*) is also common, but the larvae usually develop too slowly to have an impact. Two moths imported from Madagascar were host tested. In controlled tests they were found to feed on important non-target plants so no releases were made and all these insects were destroyed.

Other potential biological control agents have been identified, but rigorous testing is needed to ensure that they do not feed on closely related Australian native plants. No new agents are expected to be released in the near future.

Further information

Further information is available from the vegetation management/weed control/environmental staff at your local government.

TABLE 1 – HERBICIDES REGISTERED FOR THE CONTROL OF FIREWEED

Situation	Herbicide	Rate	Comments
pastures	Bromoxynil	1.4–2.8 L /ha	Not effective on mature plants (refer to Herbicide control section of Pest Fact) Lower rate for seedlings
non-crop, pastures, agricultural land	2,4-D acid	7 L/1000 L water	Apply as an overall spray when plants are actively growing