



Snakeweed and its control

Stachytarpheta spp



Description

Snakeweeds also known as Porter weeds (*Stachytarpheta spp.*) are all clumping perennial plants, with rather tough, branched stems and woody roots. Four snakeweeds are found in Queensland varying in flower colour and leaf shape – some hybridisation has also been reported.

Leaves are in pairs along the stem. They are 10 cm long and are more or less oval shaped, either toothed or untoothed along the edges and usually tapering at the base into a short stalk.

The flowers are borne on stiff spikes are 25 cm long. These spikes are slightly curved rather than straight.

Flower colour varies with the species from white to pale blue, light blue, dark blue to purple and pink to red. Each flower is a slender 0.5 cm wide tube opening into five petals.

The lower part of the flower is sunk into a depression in the flower stalk. A pointed bract protects the point where the flower joins the spike. The distinctive 'snake skin' appearance of the flower spike develops as the flowers dry and fall as the seeds develop beneath the 'scale'.

Distribution and habitat

Snakeweeds are native to the tropical Americas, and 8 species have become weeds in tropical areas around the Pacific. They were introduced as garden plants from where they have spread and become a serious weed along coastal Queensland.

Different species favour different environments:

- dark blue snakeweed is most common in the wetter coastal areas of the north Queensland, seldom found inland
- light blue snakeweed is hardier and grows in sandy soils
- pink snake weed is found only in the wet cool area around Kuranda and Atherton Tableland areas.

Snakeweeds are weeds of roadsides, neglected areas and pastures as well as sugar cane.

Problem

Snakeweed becomes a problem when ground cover is eliminated or reduced. In pastures, it is a definite indication of overstocking. Snakeweed is usually only seen when pasture is grazed down to ground level, becoming most evident in November-January.

Soil disturbance such as tree clearing can allow snakeweed to invade.

Control

Chemical control

2,4-D amine is the only herbicide registered for control of snakeweed in non-agricultural land (see table). Note it is only effective actively growing plants. Spraying in summer is most effective.

Management strategies

Snakeweed, like most other weeds, becomes a problem only when pastures are overgrazed. If an area has become open to snakeweed infestation, the following plan is recommended:

- destock paddocks where snakeweed is a problem
- slash snakeweed before it reaches seed set or
- spray plants with 2,4-D amine (see table). For best results spray:
 - light blue snakeweed at the seedling stage
 - dark blue, cayenne or pink snakeweeds when mature but actively growing.

- If you are unable to slash the infestation before seeding or spray when actively growing, wait for the plants to die back and seed to drop, then slash.
- Promote pasture growth; native pasture is usually not competitive enough once snakeweed has established itself; improved pasture grasses may have to be sown.
- When pasture grasses are reestablished, snakeweed will eventually be sufficiently suppressed to cease being a problem; but until then follow-up slashing or spraying before seeding will be required.
- Reintroduce stock only to the carrying capacity of the land—do not overstock or the snakeweed problem will reoccur.

Species description

- Dark blue snakeweed (*Stachytarpheta urticifolia*) has a smooth stem and soft leaves with a lumpy or rough surface. The leaves have strongly toothed edges and pointed tips and are similar to lantana. The flowers are dark blue to purple.
- Cayenne snakeweed (*Stachytarpheta cayennensis*) has stems and leaves similar to the dark blue snakeweed, but the flowers are pale blue to white.
- Pink snakeweed (*Stachytarpheta mutabilis*) looks very similar to a giant version of dark blue snakeweed growing to 2 m or more. Leaves are very similar to the dark blue snakeweeds, but bigger and the flowers are bigger and bright pink to red.
- Light blue snakeweed (*Stachytarpheta jamaicensis*) has smooth stems. The leaves are very different to other snakeweeds, making it difficult to recognize until flowering. The leaves are leathery with a waxy smooth surface with a rounded tip and the edges are finely toothed. The flowers are pale blue to blue.
- *Stachytarpheta dichotoma* is found in the Northern Territory and closely resembles light blue snakeweed but has rough hairy stems.

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 SNAKEWEED

Situation	Herbicide	Rate	Comments
Land - non-agricultural	2,4-D amine (various trade names)	2.2 l/ha 22 ml/10 L to cover 100 m ²	Seedlings or young stages only

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