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Hairy Vetch
Vicia villosa

I was reminded of how opportunistic weeds can be a few days ago when I was occupying my granddaughter outside a local shopping center. At one and a half, she is curious and energetic, and I let her run down the sidewalk to an unfinished section of the center. The front of this particular unit was made of glass from knee to ceiling. While the inside walls were finished with sheetrock, the floor was still dirt - the kind of dirt that is left after construction: fine and gritty, with barely any nutritional value.

Through the glass window I spied green plants and being curious myself, I ventured closer and was amazed to see Hairy Vetch growing quite vigorously out of the dirt. There were a number of other weeds as well, but I had to look close to see them because the Vetch was growing over the top of them, as is its habit. Its weak stems can grow up to six feet long and usually fall over and lay above other vegetation. This plant has long, well developed tendrils that wrap around and attach themselves to the lower growing plants as a means of support. This characteristic also allows it to obtain maximum light, as it was doing inside the vacant building at the shopping center.

Hairy Vetch is classified as an annual or short-lived perennial of the Pea family (*Fabaceae*). Its leaves are pinnately compound with 10 to 20 linear to narrowly lance-shaped leaflets that are ¾ to 1 inch long. The leaf arrangement is opposite and each leaflet has a tendril growing from its tip. Each of these tendrils has several long branches, which provide maximum support. The stems, leaves, and sepals are hairy, which is why we commonly call it Hairy Vetch. It is also known as winter vetch, fodder vetch, wooly vetch, Russian vetch, or Siberian vetch.

The flowers of Hairy Vetch provide a beautiful display of reddish purple to blue violet. They originate from the leaf axil and are borne in crowded, narrow, elongate clusters, usually on one side of the stalk. There are 20 to 60 flowers per cluster with each individual flower being ¾ to 1 inch long and trumpet-shaped. You may notice them as you're driving past a vacant lot or along roadsides this summer. They begin to flower in June and continue to do so during the hot summer months.

Being in the Pea family, Hairy Vetch produces seed in the form of pods that are also ¾ to 1 inch long and have several seeds in one pod. The pods themselves are elongated and flat. Like most legumes, it has the ability to improve the nitrogen content of the soil through nitrogen fixation. Hairy Vetch can enrich the soil with 60-120 pounds of nitrogen per acre and it is considered the Mercedes of cover crops for most parts of the United States. It is also used to improve the soil along roads and highways. The shallow root system is extensive, yet shallow, which makes it great to use as a soil stabilizer along banks, slopes, ditches, and roads.

With all of these things going for it, Hairy Vetch is still considered a weed because these same attributes make it hard to control and give it the potential to be invasive. A single plant can cover a significantly large surface area and compete for light, water, and nutrients with other plants, desirables and undesirables alike. By increasing the nitrogen content of a normally infertile soil, it can allow other non-natives to out-compete native species. Although it spreads entirely by seed, the seeds remain viable in the soil for many years. In pastures and other forage areas, it is a danger to livestock where it occasionally causes poisoning when eaten. Only animals with black pigmented skin seem to be affected, but the mortality rate of affected animals is high. Because years of uneventful grazing occur, it is still used as a nutritious forage plant.

For those of us who need to remove Hairy Vetch from our gardens, pulling it out by hand before it sets seeds can be effective. For large stands, tillage will help control it. It can be mowed down to a very short height when in full bloom to prevent the seeds from setting and remove a large amount of the plant. A mixture of dicamba and 2,4-D is listed as being an excellent chemical control by Washington State University, while tiasulfuron receives a "good" rating. Be careful not to apply 2,4-D or dicamba near the roots of trees and shrubs as damage will occur. And always read and follow the label.

RESOURCES:

Northwest Weeds, 9th Printing, 2004

Weeds of the West, 9th Edition, 2001

USDA Forest Service, Weed of the Week 02-09-05
http:// www.na.fs.fed.us/fhp.invasive_plants

PNW Weed Management Handbook 2006
http://pnwpest.org/pnw/weeds

University of Wisconsin Extension –Marinette County
www.uwex.edu

Canadian Poisonous Plants Information System
http://www.cbif.gc.ca/pls/pp/ppack

Toxic Plant Database
http://texnat.tamu.edu/cmplants/toxic.hairyvetch

University of Wisconsin, Alternative Field Crops Manual
http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop.afcm.vetch

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
Cover Crops: Hairy Vetch
http://www.omfra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/facts/cover_crops01/hairyvetch

Becky Phillips, May 2006