

Houndstongue *Cynoglossum officinale*

Mother Nature tricked me again last spring. While walking through a natural area, I stopped to admire what I thought were the emerging fuzzy leaves of Arrow-leaf Balsamroot, a favorite wildflower of mine. The stand was unusually big, so I returned later hoping to photograph the flowers. Balsamroot season came and went without a single bloom, so I took a closer look. The leaves were indeed fuzzy like the wildflower, but not arrow shaped at all. They ranged in size from a few inches up to a foot long. I learned later that their elliptical shape actually inspired this plant's common name: Houndstongue.



Houndstongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*) is a biennial in the Borage family, and like its relatives, it has short hairs on the leaves; the flower petals are fused into a short tube with five lobes; and each flower produces four prickly seeds. These seeds can catch on just about any surface, which really aids their distribution. The seeds of Houndstongue are so good at this in fact, that they are rumored to be the inspiration for Velcro. I wish Velcro stuck half as well as these seeds do.

Around our area, Houndstongue blooms from June to early July. The bloom stalks range from eight inches to three feet tall, and the flowers are about a third of an inch in diameter. They are dark red to purple, almost black in color and grow in long cluster near the top of the plant. While other plants in this family have coiled flower stalks, this one has fairly straight ones. As with other biennials, this weed blooms in its second year, and dies after going to seed.

While not targeted in Spokane County, Houndstongue is a “weed of concern” here, and is a Class B Noxious Weed in Washington state. It is a concern in most of the continental US, but is rarely found in states around the Gulf of Mexico from Texas to Florida. It was introduced from Europe before 1900 and grows in pastures, roadsides and disturbed sites.

One reason for concern is that Houndstongue carries an alkaloid poison that can kill livestock. Animals wouldn't normally graze on it, but it can contaminate feed, like alfalfa, and is just as toxic when it dries out. Sheep are more resistant than cows and horses, but if any animal consumes enough, the poison causes the liver to cease functioning, and the animals do not recover.

For that reason, and because it is invasive, with mature plants producing up to 675 seeds, control is desirable. The leaves and stalk can be mowed down, but like other taprooted plants, it can regenerate from roots below ground. For small infestations, hand pulling can be effective if it's done after the flower stalk begins to grow. Many of the anchoring roots die of at this stage, making it easier to get the whole plant. Make sure to destroy it however, as it may still set seed after being pulled.



In larger areas, or where chemicals cannot be used, there are insects that are host specific and don't show evidence of causing problems in sensitive areas. They will not eradicate the weed, and may take a few seasons to establish, but they have proven to be effective. Currently there are five insects approved for use, or undergoing trials. These include: *Mogulones cruciger*, a root feeding weevil, *Mogulones trisignatus*, a stem feeding weevil, *Mogulones borraginus*, a seed weevil, *Cheilisia pasquorum*, a root fly, and *Longitarsus quadriguttatus*, a root beetle.



Mogulones cruciger



Longitarsus quadriguttatus

When necessary, there are herbicides that control Houndstongue. Picloram may be used in the spring, summer or fall. 2-4,D amine can also be applied just before the flower stalk emerges (early to mid-spring). Studies show this can achieve a 97% control rate.

If you enjoy walking or hiking in natural areas, you'll probably find Houndstongue seeds hitchhiking on your clothes sooner or later. If that happens, you can thwart this weed's evil plans by picking the seeds off and putting them in a plastic bag or sealable container. Then you can dump them in the garbage and keep them from snaring the next passer-by.

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