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### An Update On Purple Loosestrife - The Tide Is Turning

by Art Drysdale

by **Art Drysdale**

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Art Drysdale, a life-long resident of Toronto and a horticulturist well known all across Canada, is now a resident of Parksville, British Columbia on Vancouver Island, just north of Nanaimo. He has renovated an old home and has a new garden there. His radio gardening vignettes are heard in south-western Ontario over two radio stations: Easy 101 FM out of Tillsonburg at 2 PM weekdays and CD98.9 FM out of Norfolk County at 11:40 AM weekdays.

Art also has his own website at <http://www.artdrysdale.com>

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Judging from what I see here in southern Ontario purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) must be in full bloom all across Canada by now. It was about this time four years ago that I travelled right across the country, from Osooyos, British Columbia to Pasadena, Newfoundland, and I well remember seeing the "beautiful purple weed" in full bloom in every province, except perhaps Newfoundland, where there is not very much to be seen.

I have been defending this plant, and reminding gardeners and others of its good points (excellent for bees and honey making, colourful, does well in a variety of conditions, insect and disease resistant, and has a long blooming period), for about a decade now. In that time I've been subjected to criticism and tongue lashings from government officials, dogooder (so-called) environmentalists, conservationists, preservationists and poor lowly gardeners who dont know who to believe.

Some biologists and naturalists continue to call for a government ban on the sale and propagation of the plant which they say, as a non-native, has no natural predators and is quickly taking over our already-too-few wetlands, and causing them to fill in.

I must point out that to call for an outright ban is not only a gigantic over-reaction, but also it simply will not work. It's decades ago now that the common barberry plant (*Berberis vulgaris*) was banned because it was said to be an alternate host to wheat rust disease. That ban has been anything but effective! You can see common barberry growing wild and in abundance still, and, what about other similarly introduced non-native plants. Common tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) is in full yellow bloom now in many areas, and no one seems to be suggesting it be banned. Viper's bugloss or blue thistle (*Echium vulgare*) has been spectacular in past years (damp seasons) but is less so this year due to our drought-like conditions. Nevertheless, it is widely distributed and came from Europe, but there is no call for it to be banned, and it too prefers moist areas.

In response to continuing negative publicity, mostly from writers who just follow what others before them have written, Years ago I did a little investigation into the whole subject. I found that the possibility of purple loosestrife taking over other common wetland border plants such as cattails and natives such as willows is highly unlikely.

My late colleague Fred Dale had a farm pond edged with natives. He pointed out that naturally introduced purple loosestrife had been pushed right out by the native willows and cedars, and cattails. Just what is behind the campaign to ban this beautiful, useful plant? It is a well-known fact that the Anglers & Hunters are the main organization pushing for a ban. These people don't like loosestrife around their fly-fishing ponds because they cannot fish from the edge due to its rapidly expanding growth. They would also, by the way, like to see cattails reduced to about 50 percent of their present numbers.

Will purple loosestrife be responsible for the complete demise of all of our wetlands, as is promoted by the self-interest groups? Do you realize wetlands remain in existence for only a period of time--regardless of so-called predators such as loosestrife? Our individual existence is but a tiny fraction of the life of the planet. For us to say that wetlands are being destroyed entirely during our lifetime is rather self-serving. In fact, over the next 100 years, virtually all the wetlands we now know will cease to exist, and many new such lands will be formed. Observers of the natural progression of the planet's landform confirm this.

The real reason certain groups see purple loosestrife as a threat is that it threatens their sports--angling and hunting, and they have been successful in convincing other conservation groups that the plant is actually a threat to wetlands themselves. According to a past president of the Toronto Field Naturalists, the Ontario Federation of Naturalists has been receiving considerable funding from Ducks Unlimited and they have joined with the Anglers & Hunters in trying to have loosestrife banned.

During a spring garden show this year I had at least a dozen people comment to me about how harsh some readers had been on my comments about purple loosestrife. I replied that I was used to such reactions. The lobby against the poor plant is large and well funded by anglers and hunters, and now to a great extent by government officials, many of whom have been duped into spending our tax dollars on schemes that will help "the cause."

Those who are genuinely concerned about our plant environment, such as Helen Juhola, past president of the Toronto Field Naturalists, have thoroughly investigated "alien species" and don't see them in the same light as many of the anti-alien-plant people. In many cases those concerned about purple loosestrife have only themselves or their predecessors to blame because land has been disturbed and thats where "the purple demon" is able to come in and take over.











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Those condemning the plant might well check with competent researchers such as Dr. Spencer Barrett of the University of Toronto's botany department. Dr. Barrett's Ph.D. dissertation was on invasive alien species. He and his colleagues in that field dare anyone to show a natural, undisturbed pristine environment where purple loosestrife has invaded. He also points out the following. 1) The plant, though a major nuisance, is not causing any great economic loss (except maybe to the anglers and hunters!). 2) There is no data showing that it causes any loss of diversity of species. 3) It does not affect ecosystem health because most of the ecosystems are already disturbed.

It is also interesting to note that University of Guelph zoology department professor Ted Knuds has recently released a paper discussing the pros and cons and it concludes that the threats attributed to purple loosestrife are largely exaggerated, a point I have been making for a full decade. Further, I understand that the totally inept and misdirected research project at the University of Guelph that introduced three supposed bio-control insects - two that attacked the foliage, and one the roots - is finally ending because the funding has been cut. (Do we not remember rabbits in Australia and starlings here?) Though the funding has been cut we may well yet face a problem from one or two of these introduced species attacking other unique garden plants!

By Art C. Drysdale, 6 Nesbitt Drive, Toronto, Ontario M4W 2G3 Art Drysdale is seen hourly every day on Canada's Weather Network at 23 minutes after the hour, and heard Saturdays from 9 to 11 am, with a live two-hour radio broadcast on Toronto's TALK640 (640 on the AM dial)

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