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Rochester Sentinel Article
Profuse Purple Problems



It is blooming, big, and purple, attractive to butterflies and bees, but I don't want it. I could be describing any one of four plants growing on my place this month, bull thistle, Canada thistle, purple loosestrife or ironweed.

Bull and Canadian thistle are not native plants. Bull is a biannual that puts up a rosette the first year and then goes to seed the next. It can grow up to 6 feet tall and 3 feet wide in the right place. Canada thistle grows in patches and can take over an area if allowed. It is so bad, Indiana has listed it as a noxious weed and there are laws to try to get landowners to control patches of this nemesis. Canada thistle starts blooming in late June so most of it, but not all, is done by now.

Purple loosestrife is a wetland plant with showy purple flowers arranged on spikes. It is a beautiful plant and for that reason people have planted and planted this terrific seed spreader and wildlife killer. It does this because it does not provide suitable shelter, food, and nesting habitat for native animals. It also outcompetes native aquatic plants. Its theme should be, "move out of the way cause here I come."

As I was out spraying the fencerows on my farm with herbicide to decrease some of the brush, trees and undesirable plants such as multiflora rose, these three plants also came under my sight. There were just a few purple loosestrife in a wetland area and the thistles are past their prime spraying time, but still worth the chemical to set them back.

Of all the purple blooming plants the one with the most profuse flowers is iron weed. The other three plants are not native to American. Despite having Canada in one's name, its origins are Europe. Ironweed is a native of North America.

In certain situations, I call it, a native behaving badly. Ironweed can be very competitive in pasture fields as cattle won't eat the plant. Southern Indiana and farther south have more problems with this perennial plant. If planted outside of the pasture, it is a pollinator plant favored by bees and butterflies.

But it's not wanted on my farm and became a victim of the herbicide. In reality this tough plant may wilt but with a strong underground rhizome system, it has the potential to come back next year. Maybe all I have done is interrupt its seed formation.

Natives behaving badly, I can think of several plants that fit that category..... poison ivy for one.

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