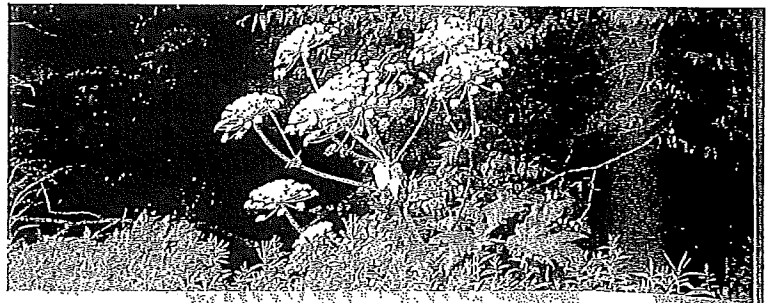


## VEGETATION MANAGEMENT



Giant hogweed, one of 13 plants on Pennsylvania's noxious weed list, can cause severe skin burning and blistering.

### TAKING CONTROL

# 'Vegetation Management' Means a Lot More Than Mowing the Grass

With spring's arrival, township road crews traded in their snow plows for mowers, chainsaws, and a lot of other tools that help them keep unwanted or errant green things in check. From mowing roadside rights of way to trimming trees and maintaining parks, it's a job that won't end until the first frost. For townships, successful "vegetation management" requires planning, training, knowing the law, and making sure they have an up-to-date ordinance in place.

BY JENNIFER L. FLORER / ASSISTANT EDITOR

**T**he bamboo is taking over in Pocopson Township, Chester County. The small municipality covers just 8.4 square miles, and the invasive plant seems determined to cover all of it.

"It's a terrible problem," secretary Susan Simone says.

The tall, reed-like plant interferes with plowing when it's weighed down with heavy snow and hanging over the road. Residents complain to the township when a neighbor's bamboo screen creeps onto their property.

And it has even earned its own subsection in the township's nuisance ordinance, which states that planting runner-type Japanese bamboo along property lines or allowing the roots to invade another's property is unlawful.

This example of ornamental plantings

gone wild shows how for townships, vegetation management means a lot more than mowing along the roads. These days, township supervisors and public works crews have a lot to consider when working to care for and control the local flora.

### Updating ordinances

Melissa Bravo, botanist and weed scientist for the state Department of Agriculture who conducts the noxious weed workshop at PSATS' Annual Conference, says adopting a weed ordinance is a good place to start. If the township already has one, it should make sure the provisions are still in line with state law.

"Some townships might have older ordinances in place that conflict with the Noxious Weed Control Act, which was passed in the early 1980s," Bravo says. The legislature revised that law in 1989, and more recent changes have been made through regulations.

The law says that any plant "that is determined to be injurious to public health, crops, livestock, agricultural land, or other property" may not be sold, transported, planted, or otherwise

Occurrences of goatsrue are dwindling thanks to a program to eradicate this noxious weed in the state. (Photos courtesy of Pa. Department of Agriculture.)



## Learn more about noxious weeds and invasive plants

propagated. If a resident violates that law and does not heed a warning from the department to get rid of the weed, that task falls to the township.

Thirteen weeds are on the most-wanted list right now — the plants that are subject to action under the law. (See the box at right for more information.) Bravo wants to make sure that township ordinances reference the up-to-date list and don't misuse the word "noxious" to refer to invasive plants that are not part of that select group.

"They can't use 'noxious' now to refer to other plants," Bravo says, "but ordinances could define 'invasive' at the local level and not conflict with state law."

When Pocopson Township was looking to establish its own nuisance law, which covers a wide range of topics, Simone turned to Bravo for help with the section on vegetation.

"In 2009, it became clear that the township needed a nuisance ordinance that would address a variety of issues, including nuisance weeds," Simone says. "I sent Melissa a copy of what we had, and she helped us work on it."

The nuisance ordinance also covers vegetation grown to hide rubbish, lawns longer than 6 inches, invasive plants that extend into a public space, and the unmanaged growth of weeds on the state's noxious weed list.

### Battling noxious weeds

When it comes to clearing certain noxious weeds, the state takes the lead. Townships, however, can help by keeping an eye out for the plants, notifying the department of any occurrences, and assisting with the eradication as needed.

Bravo has been waging a war on two species, giant hogweed and goatsrue, with the help of federal funding — dollars she doesn't expect to see in 2012 or 2013. That's not good news since it takes several years of treatment and site visits before she can issue the "all clear" and say a site is weed-free.

A quick glance at a description for each of these weeds tells why they're on the noxious weed list. Giant hogweed can cause severe and painful blistering and scarring when anyone susceptible comes in contact with it. Goatsrue is fatal to livestock.

Keating Township in McKean

Pennsylvania's Noxious Weed Control Act prohibits the sale, transport, planting, or propagation of any plant "that is determined to be injurious to public health, crops, livestock, agricultural land, or other property."

If a resident violates that law and does not heed a warning from the state Department of Agriculture to get rid of the offending weed, that task falls to the township.

Following are the 13 plants on Pennsylvania's noxious weed list:

- Bull thistle or spear thistle (*cirsium vulgare*)
- Canada thistle (*cirsium arvense*)
- Giant hogweed (*heracleum mantegazzianum*)
- Goatsrue (*galega officinalis*)
- Jimsonweed (*datura stramonium*)
- Johnson grass (*sorghum halepense*)
- Kudzu-vine (*pueraria lobata*)
- Marijuana (*cannabis sativa*)
- Mile-a-minute (*polygonum perfoliatum*)
- Multiflora rose (*rosa multiflora*)
- Musk thistle or nodding thistle (*carduus nutans*)
- Purple loosestrife (*lythrum salicaria*)
- Shattercane (*sorghum bicolor*)

Townships may contact their regional Department of Agriculture office with questions or Melissa Bravo at (717) 787-7204. Notify the department of giant hogweed or goatsrue sightings on the noxious weed hotline toll-free at **(877) 464-9333**.

The department also offers comprehensive information about noxious, invasive, and poisonous plants on its website at [www.agriculture.state.pa.us](http://www.agriculture.state.pa.us). Choose "Programs" and then search for "Noxious, Invasive, and Poisonous Plant Program."

Townships can also learn more about invasive plants at [www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/invasivetutorial](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/invasivetutorial) and at [www.invasive.org](http://www.invasive.org).

County is one of the places goatsrue has taken hold, and the story of how it got there is a good lesson in plant dispersal. After the dredging of an area lake a few years ago, the fill material was used in local flower beds, fields, drainage ditches, and other places. The goatsrue found many a happy home and took hold.

Township supervisors and employees, however, have been doing what they can to pitch in and take the noxious weed out.

"We're working hand in hand with the Department of Agriculture," supervisor and road employee Chris Chapman says. "Melissa and one of her coworkers come up here with a couple pickups that have portable pumps to spray. If we see goatsrue anywhere, we let her know because they have to document all that. When we're out working on the roads, we're always on the lookout for noxious weeds of any type."

That, Bravo says, is a huge help: "This program only works if the communities participate."

She's also looking for assistance to control the other plants on the noxious weed list. These species, while clearly identified as a problem, are not under any formal control program because no funding exists.

"We don't receive funding from the state or the counties," Bravo says. "Out West, they have a weed tax, but we don't have that here, so if you have Canada thistle [another noxious weed], we're not going to be able to help you get rid of that."

### Staying safe

Giant hogweed and goatsrue garnered federal funding because of their toxicity. The severe skin reaction possible with giant hogweed presents a significant safety concern for anyone who

# VEGETATION MANAGEMENT

comes in contact with it. That includes road workers who might not recognize the plant or be aware of the danger.

And that's why covering up is one key to staying safe.

"If you were out there spreading tar, you would be wearing protective gear," Bravo says. She advises any township employee working with plants to do the same.

In fact, safety really is job No. 1 in vegetation management — before any cutting, digging, planting, or spraying begins.

"The first thing you want to do is

take proper safety precautions," says Ron Brown, an office director for the engineering firm Pennoni Associates and an instructor with the PennDOT Local Technical Assistance Program. "That should always be part of your training."

"Safety" means wearing the proper protection, from eyewear and footwear to hardhats, when appropriate, and gloves. It also doesn't hurt to get some formal training on operating mowers, chainsaws, and other mechanical equipment.

Glenn Coakley, the road superintendent for Patton Township in Centre County, says a chainsaw safety class should be required for any public works crew. He describes an LTAP course that covered that topic as "outstanding."

"I've had a chainsaw in my hand since I was 12, and I learned a lot," he says.

## Obeying the law

Training is not just recommended but *required* for anyone in a township who will be spraying pesticides. In fact, any township that wants to combat weeds with chemicals should consider every one of their obligations under the state's Pesticide Control Act of 1963.

The law, administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, requires that before townships apply pesticides, they acquire a license, have the appropriate employees certified, and obtain the necessary insurance. An applicator must pass a written exam to obtain a three-year certification.

Once all that is done, a township still can't spray until it has notified any residents listed in the state's Pesticide Hypersensitivity Registry of the plans.

Despite the long checklist of requirements, Brown says spraying might still be a good option for some townships.

"If you get into an area and spray it, that can be a very cost-effective way of controlling a species so you don't have to come back in and attack it with manual or mechanical means," he adds.

Pesticide application isn't the only aspect of vegetation management where the law comes into play. Legal requirements go together with township liability: think sign visibility, sight distance, and fire hazard control.

## Proper planning

Townships take on vegetation management for a number of reasons. Protecting the health, safety, and welfare of residents is one. Beautifying the community is another. Pavement preservation is also a consideration, along with ensuring proper drainage, controlling erosion, and allowing for adequate winter maintenance.

A township will be more likely to achieve those goals if it has a plan of action in place. That should include areas that need to be addressed, the maintenance methods to be used, what equipment is needed, and when the areas will be targeted. Of course, Mother Nature requires flexibility in every plan to accommodate late-season snows, early

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springs, and storms that wreak havoc with township trees.

Brown outlines several control options. The first is manual, using trimmers, chainsaws, hand pruners, and other small tools. These are generally best for small or hard-to-reach areas where bigger equipment is out of the question. The downsides? Workers shoulder a great safety risk when using manual methods, and everything that's been cut will be back before you know it.

Mechanical methods incorporate larger machinery.

"Mechanical methods are mowers, brush cutters — what you use to take care of your grasses," Brown says. Cut too close to the ground with this equipment, though, and erosion could be a problem. If not cleaned up, the cuttings could also block drainage areas or, in dry periods, create a fire hazard.

Townships might not need to mow or trim as often if they use chemical methods, such as herbicides, but these carry a lot of legal requirements. Plus, the right product must be used at the right time, in the right amount, and on

the right plant, or the result is money down the drain.

Other methods, which Brown says are less common in townships, include introducing native plants to replace invasive or just plain unwanted species or introducing insects or animals to help control vegetation.

#### 'A lot to cover'

By all accounts, vegetation management is an uphill battle for many townships. Supervisors are responsible for everything growing in the township rights of way, parks, and other property; enforcing their own weed or other plant nuisance ordinances; carrying out the requirements of the Noxious Weed Law when necessary; and responding to residents' vegetation-related queries and complaints.

In Patton Township, the latter get top priority.

"Residents know that if they make a phone call today, we'll be out there to look at the situation right away," Coakley says. "Liability is a big issue."

Townships can make the whole job of vegetation management easier by incor-

porating it into their everyday routine.

"Do inspections and identify potential problems whenever you're out and about on a job," Brown suggests.

Townships can also think about the types of trees and plants they're introducing into the township, how they will grow, and what effect they might have on the environment.

For example, Bravo says: "There are certain landscape trees that are heavy pollen producers. When it comes to pollen, how do you stop the spread? Think about things like that before putting anything in the ground."

She doesn't expect every township supervisor to be a botanist, but she does suggest asking questions of someone in the know when any problem comes to light.

"They don't have to be an expert on plants," Bravo says, "but having that knowledgeable person to go to can help with so many issues. When it comes to plants, townships are already dealing with code enforcement issues, physical safety issues, and property management. It's a lot to cover." ♦

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