



Gunnera Control in the Western Isles



Gunnera tinctoria, or “Giant Rhubarb” is a non-native invasive plant which was introduced to hebridean gardens in the 1980’s. Since then it has spread rapidly in the wild and is now threatening our crofts, gardens and native habitats.

The North Harris Trust is co-ordinating a campaign to control *Gunnera* and encourages all residents to take action now.

Gunnera—The Plant

Mature *Gunnera* plants are easily recognisable. In early spring the plant sprouts rapidly from thick sturdy surface roots called rhizomes. Supported by fleshy stems as thick as your wrist and covered in small spikes, the umbrella shaped leaves with spikes on the back extend to more than a meter across. Within 3 years *Gunnera* matures and the dense clumps formed can reach over 2 meters in height.



Growth & Reproduction

Gunnera plants spread via their root system or rhizomes and entire new plants can regenerate from small fragments of broken root. They also disperse by seed. The tiny flowers are borne on erect cone-like fruiting heads up to 1m long growing from the base of the plant.

By August the seeds are ripe as can be seen by the orange/red colour. Up to 250,000 seeds can be produced by a single plant. Birds and running water are the natural carriers of *Gunnera* seed.

However, in the Western Isles one of the main distributors of *gunnera* has been man; either gardeners not understanding the potential risk or contractors transporting seed with soil and aggregates used for roadworks and landscaping.

The Problem

With an established store of food in their rhizomes, *Gunnera* plants emerge early in the season and grow rapidly, overshadowing and out competing our native flora. It is particularly fond of roadsides and riverbanks and can quickly block drainage ditches. At the end of the growing season most *Gunnera* plants die back. The resultant brown rotting vegetation is unattractive and the bare soil exposed to heavy winter rainfall is susceptible to erosion.

The maritime climate and poorly drained soils of the Hebrides provide ideal growing conditions for *Gunnera*, combine this with the absence of natural enemies and a very efficient dispersal system and it is not difficult to see why the plant is spreading and how it has the potential to become a problem for land management and local biodiversity. In other parts of the world with similar growing conditions, including New Zealand and the west coast of Ireland. *Gunnera* is already a serious pest and the subject of control campaigns.



Control Methods—*Chemical Control*

So far herbicide trials carried out by the North Harris Trust have concluded that glyphosate based products such as “Round Up” are successful and readily available.

Spraying

The most effective way to apply herbicide is spraying. Before spraying check the forecast and make sure it will be calm and dry. Any rainfall within 24 hours of spraying may wash the herbicide off the plant rendering it ineffective. Calm conditions are required to prevent the spray drifting, missing the target plant and damaging the wider environment.

When spraying, the entire plant needs to be covered until the liquid begins to run off. Try to spray the underside of the leaves as well.

Herbicide is most effective when applied to Gunnera late in the growing season when the plants are fully grown and right up until they begin to die back for winter. The period normally runs between late July until early October. It can take a month or more before the herbicide application will cause any visible effects. If you spray right at the end of the season the Gunnera will die back just like an untreated plant, but by next spring the herbicide should have done its job and the treated plant will not re-grow.



Gunnera following stump treatment with herbicide (blue dye)

IMPORTANT

Whichever herbicide product you use, remember herbicides are potentially dangerous to you and the environment.

Always follow the manufacturer’s instructions and wear appropriate safety clothing.

Digging Out

This is not the most efficient method, especially when dealing with a large number of plants. None-the-less digging up is the best option if conditions prohibit the safe use of herbicides. For example if rainfall is imminent or if the Gunnera is growing along a water course or if you are concerned about herbicide drifting onto valuable plants or habitats nearby.

Using a sharp spade to dig up seedlings and young plants is surprisingly easy. The Gunnera rhizome is often right on the surface. Be aware that the whole rhizome needs to be removed and do not leave any pieces on the ground or the plant will regenerate. Pieces of rhizome and any mature fruiting heads should be carefully bagged and disposed of at a recycling centre or in your organic wheelie bin.

Remember whatever control method you use always check the location the next year for re-growth and seedlings. Re-treat as necessary and your dedication will pay off.

For further information please visit our website www.north-harris.org

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