Southern Gardeners Share a Common Foe in Florida Betony

Eleven states west to Texas and north to Virginia, Tennessee and Arkansas are using the Internet to warn their citizens and each other about a Florida native that escaped its borders in the 1940s and 1950s to invade their turfgrasses and ornamental plantings.

"Alien Alert!" warns a Smith County, Texas Master Gardener. The Low Country Master Gardener Association in Beaufort, SC declares, "Florida Betony Strikes Again".

Strong words for just an ordinary looking weed... green most of the year until the heat of summer sends it packing underground. It even has lavender to pink flowers in late spring, blooming at the top of an upright square stem with two-inch long leaves, stealthily pretending to be just another spring perennial.

So what's to hate about Florida betony? *Stachys floridana* Shuttlew or Rattlesnake Weed, as identified in the Florida Cooperative Extension Service publication, *Weeds of Southern Turfgrasses*, is native to Florida and is thought to be moved with nursery stock and ornamental plants. Florida betony, as it is usually called, is a formidable foe because it has an underground network of stringy white roots that end in white rhizomes or tubers. These resemble the tail end of a rattlesnake.

The tubers can grow to more than eight inches and as deep as 12 inches in the soil, all the while spreading in every direction to form new plants. The flowers also produce seeds, that when left to mature, fall on the ground and germinate. Florida betony is not particular about where it grows... sun or shade, dry to moist soil. It especially likes thin or bare lawn areas and flower beds where there is not much to crowd it out.
Even this aggressive invader has to rest. It goes dormant in the heat and humidity of summer, storing energy in its underground tubers, and emerges strong again in the fall when the temperature cools. Growth may slow in the cold of midwinter but resumes its vigor in spring.

How do we rid our gardens and lawns of it? In lawns, some people use a herbicide such as atrazine or Prompt (a combination of atrazine and bentazon). If you do so, follow label instructions exactly. Avoid application in seasons when the temperatures are above 85 degrees. The most effective time to apply is in October. Lawn herbicides can damage shrubs, flowers, and trees, so avoid spraying near them.

Maintaining a healthy, dense lawn will prevent Florida betony from growing there. This, as Leon County Horticulture Extension Agent David Marshall has advised in many articles in the Democrat, is the best prevention for many other lawn weeds as well.

Heavy mulch or use of landscape fabric in flower beds may slow down the weed's emergence. Then again this may result in just another failure to conquer the invader. One year I carefully used landscape cloth, covered it with pine straw and enjoyed success all summer. When it was time to clean the flower bed in the fall, I lifted the cloth and found a network of white roots and tubers waiting to take over.

Probably the most effective remedy is to pull the weed when the ground is moist. A gentle pull sometimes dislodges the tuber. Then dig the area, removing all other roots and tubers you see. You are not likely to get them all but repeated pulling and digging will. You can also starve the plant by repeatedly cutting down the green stalk.

"If chemical cocktails aren't your cup of tea," the Low Country Master Gardeners joked, "some people welcome Florida betony as a green winter addition to the landscape."

But the MG from Texas declared: "For fence rows, I am applying glyphosate (Roundup) until it stops coming back or I go broke, whichever comes first." Spot treatments with glyphosate herbicides, such as Roundup, will weaken the betony. But complete control will require multiple applications. And the herbicide cannot contact your desirable plants or it will damage them too.

Weed control specialists with the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension took a more philosophical view. "The tubers are edible and some people relish their crisp, succulent flavor--who knows, maybe one day we will be figuring out how to grow Florida betony instead of killing it!"

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