Invasive Alien Plant Species of Virginia

Mile-a-minute (*Polygonum perfoliatum* L.)

Description

Also called tearthumb because of the spines on its leaves and stems, this annual vine of the smartweed family can climb up to 15 feet in height. Although similar to two native *Polygonum* species (arrow-vine and halberd-leaved tearthumb), mile-a-minute differs from these primarily in its leaves and fruits. The leaves are light green, one to three inches wide, and perfectly triangular. The fruits are berry-like, fleshy, blue, and approximately pea-sized. The most striking feature of this plant is the saucer-shaped sheath at the base of each leaf. This feature is not found on any other *Polygonum* species. Rapidly growing at about a half foot per day, mile-a-minute can reach lengths of 20 feet. This prolific vine easily grows over other vegetation, stealing nutrients, choking stems, and blocking sunlight.

Habitat

Mile-a-minute thrives in areas with plenty of direct sunlight and damp soil. It is especially prevalent along roadsides, ditches, stream banks, wet meadows, and clearcuts. It generally grows in areas with an abundance of leaf litter on the soil surface. This appears to help keep the soil moist and may aid in the germination of seeds.

Distribution

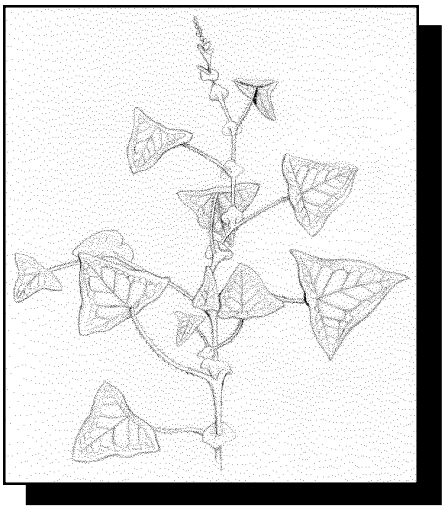
A native of Japan, mile-a-minute was accidentally brought to Pennsylvania in the 1930's with a shipment of rhododendrons. Its seeds were allowed to mature and were soon spread by birds and rodents that ate the fruits. In eight years, from 1981 to 1989, mile-a-minute extended its range in Pennsylvania from five to eleven counties. In recent years, it has crept down the coast into Maryland and Washington D.C., becoming established in more than half of Maryland's counties. Although not widely distributed in Virginia, mile-a-minute has the ability to rapidly colonize roadsides and waste areas and become a pest. So far it has been reported at a few sites in Northern Virginia.

Threats

Its rapid growth and viney nature allow mile-a-minute to overtake the native vegetation of an area, smothering seedlings and out-competing adult plants for space, nutrients and sunlight. This competition is a particular concern in wet meadows which may support rare wetland plants. Although it does not appear to be a threat to farmers, it can easily become a pest to gardeners and landscapers, destroying ornamental plants and landscaped yards.

Control

Because mile-a-minute is an annual (propagating only from seeds) with a shallow root system, this invasive is best removed from lightly infested areas by digging the plants up (with strong gloves to protect hands from the spines) and disposing of them before they go to seed. Seed set begins in early August and terminates at first frost. Removal of the plants is also best accomplished before the plant becomes excessively viney. Removal of brush, leaves and woodpiles which may create thick litter is also effective in controlling the spread of the plant. Herbicides may be used as an alternative in heavily infested areas. Spot applications of biodegradable glyphosphate herbicides are recommended before mile-a-minute goes to seed in early August. As glyphosphate is a non-selective herbicide which affects all green vegetation, it should be used sparingly so as not to contact desirable vegetation which may be growing with the mile-a-minute. Professionals should be consulted to determine the best method of control in patches that are heavily infested with this invasive species.



Mile-a-minute *(Polygonum perfoliatum)*

Reference

Mountain, W. L. 1989. Mile-a-minute update - distribution, biology and control suggestions. *Regulatory Horticulture* **15**(2):21-24.

For more information, contact the Department of Conservation and Recreation, or the Virginia Native Plant Society.

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