

FIREWEED

Senecio madagascariensis



Photographs are courtesy of Dr Sheldon Navie

Description & life cycle

Fireweed is a serious and invasive weed found along the south-eastern coast of Australia. It is a Class 2 declared plant in Queensland and a Class 4 noxious weed in some parts of NSW. This species favours pastures and can be very aggressive in areas that are overgrazed.

Fireweed is a short-lived plant with many branched stems growing 10 - 70 cm tall. Its stalkless leaves are bright green and variable in shape, though they are usually quite narrow and elongated. Numerous bright yellow, daisy-like flowers are produced on each plant. These flower-heads have 12-15 petals and their bases are surrounded by approximately 20 greenish bracts, creating a "cup" under the flower.

Fireweed reproduces by seed and re-establishes each year from seed stored in the soil. Fireweed seeds prolifically, with each flower producing around 100 seeds and an average plant potentially producing over 10,000 seeds in a growing season! Each of the small brown seeds are topped with a silky tuft of white hairs. Seeds usually germinate in mild or warm conditions and most seedlings appear in autumn and winter.

Fireweed seeds are usually dispersed in the wind, however may also be spread by animals, on vehicles and in contaminated agricultural produce (eg. pasture seeds, hay, turf, mulch and livestock). Fireweed is toxic to livestock and is often responsible for illness, slow growth and poor conditioning of cattle. Consumption of Fireweed can also cause death.

Key features

- > Numerous bright yellow flower-heads
- > Toxic to livestock
- > "Cup" underneath the flower created by green bracts

Control

1. Isolated plants can be hand pulled or chipped out and then disposed of appropriately. Remove all chipped-out plants to eliminate the chance of seed spread.
2. Herbicides are most effective if applied prior to flowering in late autumn. Boom spraying in an open pasture situation can be effective. This application method should be followed up by spot spraying, or pulling and bagging any regrowth or missed plants. When applying herbicides for weed control in pastures, special care should be taken to check and adhere to stock withholding periods.
3. The best approach to Fireweed control is to prevent it establishing by ensuring that there is a dense cover of pasture in autumn and winter. Acting immediately when small infestations are detected will assist in eradication.

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