



**King County**  
Department of  
Natural Resources and Parks  
Water and Land Resources Division

**Noxious Weed Control Program**

**BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES**

**Yellow-flag iris**  
*(Iris pseudacorus)*  
**Iridaceae**

**Class C Noxious Weed; Not Designated  
for Control**

**Legal Status in King  
County:**

Class C Noxious Weed (non-native species that can be designated for control under State Law RCW 17.10 based on local priorities.) The King County Noxious Weed Control Board does not require property owners to control yellow-flag iris, but control is recommended.



## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

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### **Impacts and History**

- Alternate common names include yellow flag, paleyellow iris and yellow iris.
- On state weed lists in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Montana and New Hampshire in addition to Washington. Also on the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service invasive plants list and on the Exotic Plant Pest List of the California Exotic Pest Plant Council.
- Yellow-flag iris displaces native vegetation along streambanks, wetlands, ponds and shorelines and reduces habitat needed by waterfowl and fish, including several important salmon species.
- It clogs small streams and irrigation systems, and it dominates shallow wetlands, wet pastures and ditches. Its seeds clog up water control structures and pipes.
- Rhizome mats can prevent the germination and seedling growth of other plant species. These mats can also alter the habitat to favor yellow-flag iris by compacting the soil as well as increasing elevation by trapping sediments.
- Studies in Montana show that yellow-flag iris can reduce stream width by up to 10 inches per year by trapping sediment, creating a new bank and then dominating the new substrate with its seedlings, creating still more sediment retention (Tyron 2006).
- Even when dry, yellow-flag iris causes gastroenteritis in cattle (Sutherland 1990), although livestock tend to avoid it. All plant parts also cause gastric distress in humans when ingested, and the sap can cause skin irritation in susceptible individuals.
- Native to Europe and the Mediterranean region, including North Africa and Asia Minor. Found as far north as 68 degrees North in Scandinavia.

- The earliest North American record comes from Newfoundland in 1911, and it was established in British Columbia by 1931. By 1961 yellow-flag iris was reported to be naturalized in Canada (Cody 1961). It was established in California by 1957 and in Montana by 1958 (Tyron 2006). It is now naturalized in parts of most states and provinces throughout North America except in the Rocky Mountains. (NRCS Plants Database).

## Description

- A perennial, emergent iris that creates dense stands along freshwater margins. It is the only naturalized, emergent yellow iris in King County.
- Grows to 5 feet (1.5 m) tall.
- Has numerous thick, fleshy rhizomes.
- Flowers are yellow, showy, and sometimes have brown to purple veins at the base of the petals. Several flowers can occur on each stem.
- Can bloom from April to August; in western Washington usually blooms May into July. It will remain green all winter in mild years.
- Broad, flat, pointed leaves are folded and overlap one another at the base. They are generally longer in the center of the plant and fan out in a single plane toward the edges of the plant. The leaves are dark green to blue-green.
- Fruits are large capsules to 3 inches (8 cm) long. They are 3-angled, glossy green and contain rows of many flattened brown seeds.
- Seeds are corky, large - about ¼ inch (7 mm) across, and float. Seed pods grow in clusters that resemble little bunches of bananas. Seeds spread by water and usually germinate after the water recedes along the edges of the shore. They do not usually germinate under water.
- When not in flower or seed, can be confused with cattails (*Typha sp.*), which are round at the base and taller than yellow-flag iris, while iris are flattened along one plane and shorter. Can also be mistaken for native bur-reeds (*Sparganium sp.*), which have thick, spongy leaves that are somewhat narrower than iris leaves.

## Habitat

- Occurs in freshwater wetlands, fens, ponds, lake shores, river and stream banks, wet pastures and ditches.
- Grows in standing water or next to it on saturated soils. Prefers silty, sandy or rocky soil.
- Generally grows in shallow water, but can create extensive mats over deeper water.
- Sometimes cultivated as a garden ornamental or used for landscaping purposes.

## Reproduction and Spread

- Spreads by seed and vegetatively (rhizomes).
- Produces extensive thick, fleshy rhizomes, forming dense mats that exclude native wetland species. Up to several hundred flowering plants may be connected rhizomatously. Rhizome fragments can form new plants if they break off and drift to suitable habitat. Rhizomes that dry out remain viable and will re-infest an area if they are re-moistened.

- Flat spongy seeds disperse through water and germinate after the water recedes along shorelines. Submersed seeds will generally not germinate.
- Plants take three years to mature before flowering (Tyron 2006).
- The flowers are pollinated by bumble-bees and long-tongued flies.

### **Local Distribution**

- Widespread throughout King County.
- Present along most lake shores and many stream banks in the developed areas of the county.
- A few shallow wetlands significantly impacted.

## **CONTROL INFORMATION**

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### **Integrated Pest Management**

- The preferred approach for weed control is Integrated Pest Management (IPM). IPM involves selecting from a range of possible control methods to match the management requirements of each specific site. The goal is to maximize effective control and to minimize negative environmental, economic and social impacts.
- Use a multifaceted and adaptive approach. Select control methods that reflect the available time, funding, and labor of the participants, the land use goals, and the values of the community and landowners. Management may require dedication over a number of years, and should allow for flexibility in method as appropriate.

### **Planning Considerations**

- Survey area for weeds, set priorities and select best control method(s) for the site conditions and regulatory compliance issues (**refer to the King County Noxious Weed Regulatory Guidelines or local jurisdictions**).
- Isolated plants can be effectively dug up. Take care to remove all of the rhizomes, in order to stop them from infesting a larger area.
- For larger infestations, the strategy will depend on the site. Generally work first in least infested areas, moving towards more heavily infested areas. On rivers and streams, begin at the infestation furthest upstream and work your way downstream.
- If conducting manual control, be sure to collect any rhizome fragments that may float free.
- Minimize disturbance to avoid creating more opportunities for seed germination.

### **Early Detection and Prevention**

- Look for new plants. Get a positive plant identification by contacting your local noxious weed control program or extension service.
- Look for plants along river and lake shorelines, wetlands, ditches and wet pastures.
- The best time to survey is in April to June when the plants are in flower.
- Look for seedlings starting in late winter.
- Dig up small isolated patches, being sure to remove all the rhizome.
- Don't buy, move or plant yellow-flag iris.

- Clean any tools and machinery that were used in an infested area before moving to another site.

## **Manual**

- Hand removal with the use of hand tools is allowable in all critical areas in unincorporated King County. Check with the local jurisdiction for regulations in other areas.
- When removing manually, care should be taken to protect the skin, as resins in the leaves and rhizomes can cause irritation.
- Manual control is feasible for individual plants or small stands. You can easily pull seedlings in damp or wet soil.
- Dig out mature plants, taking care to remove all the rhizome. The rhizome is tough and may require heavier tools, such as pickaxes, pulaskis or saws. If you do not get all the rhizome, more plants will be produced. Keep watching the location after you have removed the plants, and new leaves will show you where you missed any sections of rhizome. Continue to remove the rhizome, and in this way you can eradicate a small patch.
- Simon (2008) found that for plants emergent in standing water for the entire growing season, cutting all leaves and stems off below the waterline can result in good control. This method is most effective if the plants are cut before flowering.
- Be sure to dispose of any removed pieces of rhizome away from wet sites. Composting is not recommended for these plants in any home compost system, because rhizomes can continue growing even after three months without water (Sutherland 1990).

## **Mechanical**

- Removal of yellow-flag iris with hand held mechanical tools is allowable in critical areas and their buffers in unincorporated King County. Check with the local jurisdiction for regulations in other areas.
- In unincorporated King County, riding mowers and light mechanical cultivating equipment may be used in critical areas if conducted in accordance with an approved forest management plan, farm management plan, or rural management plan, or if prescribed by the King County Noxious Weed Control Program.
- Repeated mowing or cutting may keep yellow-flag iris contained and can potentially kill it by depleting the energy in the rhizomes after several years of intensive mowing (Tu 2003).

## **Cultural**

- Small patches can be covered with a heavy tarp weighted at the edges for several years (Simon 2008). Be sure to extend the tarp well beyond the edges of the infestation and check periodically to ensure that plants are not growing up around the tarp. Other materials (heavy plastic, landscape cloth) are not as effective.
- Burning is not recommended. Seeds germinate and grow well after late summer burning (Sutherland 1990), and plants have a strong tendency to resprout from rhizomes after burning (Clark et al. 1998).

## Biological

- Although a number of insects and pathogens are known to attack yellow-flag iris (Tu 2003), no biological control agents are presently known, and no research is currently being conducted.

## Chemical

- Herbicides should only be applied at the rates and for the site conditions and/or land usage specified on the label. **Follow all label directions.**
- Herbicides can only be purchased and applied to aquatic systems in Washington State by a licensed pesticide applicator (contact Washington State Department of Agriculture for more information on pesticide licenses).
- There are federal, state and local restrictions on herbicide use in critical areas and their buffers. Refer to the **King County Noxious Weed Regulatory Guidelines** for a summary of current restrictions and regulatory compliance issues.
- For control of large infestations, herbicide use may be necessary. Infested areas should not be mowed until after the herbicide has had a chance to work, which may take several weeks, depending on the herbicide used.
- Due to dense growth, re-application a few weeks after initial treatment will probably be needed to get complete coverage (Tyron 2006).
- For several years following treatment, monitor areas for new plants germinating from the seed bank or from rhizome fragments. In some cases several years of treatment may be necessary.

## Specific Herbicide Information

Since yellow-flag iris is a monocot, only non-selective herbicides are effective. However, non-selective herbicides will injure or kill any plant they contact, so special care must be taken when using these chemicals. Both of the herbicides discussed below are non-selective.

**Glyphosate** (e.g. Rodeo™ or Aquamaster™). This is the most frequently used chemical for controlling yellow-flag iris. Apply to actively growing plants in late spring or early summer. Apply directly to foliage, or apply immediately to freshly cut leaf and stem surfaces. Avoid runoff. (Tu, 2003). Follow the label for recommended rates for yellow-flag iris since higher rates may provide better results. A study in Montana showed good results with 5% Rodeo plus Competitor (Tyron, 2006). Glyphosate at lower rates is not as effective as either imazapyr or imazapyr and glyphosate combined.

**Imazapyr** (e.g. Habitat®). Simon (2008) found that 1% imazapyr (with 1% non-ionic surfactant) sprayed in the fall resulted in good control. Imazapyr sprayed in the spring, or a combination of imazapyr (1%) and glyphosate (2.5%) sprayed in fall both result in good control, but slightly less effective than imazapyr alone. Note that imazapyr has been shown to have some residual soil activity, so care should be taken to avoid spraying in the root zone of desirable plants, and do not replant the treated area for several months after application.

The above listed herbicides require the addition of an approved surfactant. Follow label directions for selecting the correct type of surfactant. Be sure that the selected surfactant is approved for aquatic use.

*The mention of a specific product brand name in this document is not, and should not be construed as an endorsement or as a recommendation for the use of that product.*

Chemical control options may differ for private, commercial and government agency users. **For questions about herbicide use, contact the King County Noxious Weed Control Program at 206-296-0290.**

### **Experimental**

Preliminary trials indicate that injecting herbicide into the cut flowering stems of yellow-flag iris may provide a successful alternative treatment method with little or no non-target damage. Check with your local weed control agency for progress.

## **SUMMARY OF BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES**

### **Small Infestations in Native and/or Desirable Vegetation**

- Hand digging is recommended for very young plants not yet established.
- Larger plants from isolated small populations can be dug out from moist upland areas. This is difficult but possible with persistence.
- Replace any divots created when removing the plants to lessen the amount of disturbed soil.
- Plants emergent in standing water can be cut below the waterline.
- If manual control is not possible due to site conditions or available labor, apply appropriate herbicide by spot spray, stem-injection or wick-wiper to minimize off target injury.

### **Large Infestations**

- Persistent mowing or cutting over several years may be effective. Cutting flowering plants will stop seed dispersal.
- Herbicide use may be necessary.
- If the infestation is in a pasture, combine control methods with ongoing good pasture management. Encourage healthy grassy areas by seeding and fertilizing. Use a mix of grass and clover species to improve resistance to weeds. Fertilize according to the soil needs.

### **Control in Riparian Areas or Lake Shores**

- Survey area and document extent of infestation. Start eradication efforts at the headwaters and progress downstream whenever possible.
- Focus on manual removal for small infestations if possible.

- When removing vegetation near streams and wetlands use barriers to prevent sediment and vegetative debris from entering the water system.
- For larger areas where herbicide use is warranted, use the method that will cause the least amount of damage to desirable vegetation, such as spot spraying or wick wiping.
- When large areas of weeds are removed, the cleared area needs to be replanted with native or non-invasive vegetation and stabilized against erosion.
- Control of larger areas will need to incorporate a management plan lasting for several years to remove plants germinating from the seed bank and rhizome fragments.

### Control on Road Rights-of-Way

- Dig up small infestations if possible.
- Spot spray if digging is not practical due to soil, site conditions or size of infestation.
- If plants are in grassy areas, re-seed after control is completed.
- If plants are sprayed, wait until the herbicide has had a chance to work (up to several weeks) before mowing.

### References

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