

Pest plant – Gorse

(*Ulex europaeus*)

Fact sheet May 2017



Gorse is an evergreen perennial shrub belonging to the legume (pea) family and is also known as 'furze'. It grows into a bushy shrub up to 7 metres, but usually only grows to around 2-3 metres in height in South Australia. It produces an extensive root system and has become one of Australia's worst weeds because of its invasiveness, potential for spread, and economic and environmental impacts.

Gorse can be confused with some native species but the combination of spiny leaves, spiny stems, bright yellow pea-like flowers with a coconut-like smell make it distinguishable as Gorse.

Gorse is a *Weed of National Significance* and is a declared weed under the Natural Resources Management Act 2004 (NRM Act).

Description

Stems

Young stems are hairy, green and ribbed while mature stems have a light brownish bark and are woody. Stems are armed with numerous spines up to 5cm long and short branchlets ending in spines.

Leaves

Leaves are narrow, dark green in colour and end in a sharp pointed spine. They are 1-3cm long, hairy, sessile, and occur in clusters more or less uniformly spaced along the branchlets.

Flowers

Plants produce bright yellow pea-like flowers 2-2.5cm long that cover its form and have a distinctive coconut-like smell. Flowers are produced mostly in leaf axils and terminal clusters. Gorse can flower twice a year in autumn and spring, although in South Australia it mostly tends to flower only once in spring.

Seeds

With each flowering Gorse produces numerous hairy pea-pod shaped seed capsules, each of which can contain between two to six seeds. Seeds are green to brown, smooth, shiny, about 3mm long, hard-coated and somewhat triangular in shape with straw-coloured appendages. Studies suggest that Gorse seed can remain viable for up to 80 years in the soil.

History

Originating from western Europe Gorse was introduced into Australia as a hedge plant and a potential fodder shrub. It was one of the earliest introductions to Australia, potentially as early as 1803 and listed in a Tasmanian nursery catalogue in 1845.

Distribution

Gorse is not restricted to any particular type of soil but is most competitive on poor alkaline soils. It generally requires rainfall above 500 mm a year to do well and can live up to 30 years. Infestations are normally found on creek banks, roadsides, disturbed sites and can encroach on to grazing lands.

Gorse now occurs in all states except the Northern Territory. Its importance as a weed is related to its latitude, being more troublesome in Tasmania and southern Victoria than elsewhere in the country. In South Australia it can be found on the Fleurieu Peninsula, Mount Lofty Ranges, the Mid North, areas of the lower South-East, areas of the lower Eyre Peninsula, and Kangaroo Island.



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Gorse flowering



Gorse leaves. Photo Colin Wilson.

How is it spread?

Gorse is spread by seeds that are ejected with considerable force when the heat of the sun bursts open the seed pods. Seeds are relatively large and not equipped for wind dispersal. Seeds are also spread by birds and ants. Grading along infested roadsides contributes to spread.

Impacts

Gorse has significant impacts on agriculture and the environment, readily invading pasture and native vegetation in south eastern Australia. Once established it forms dense prickly thickets that can dominate and exclude other plant species.

Thickets can dramatically reduce the stock carrying capacity of pasture, reduce biodiversity, harbour pests, reduce access, and increase bushfire risk.

Gorse also has impacts on forestry plantations, interfering with their establishment and reducing operational access.

Control methods

Gorse will re-occur for many years, resulting in major difficulty in achieving long-term control. Long-term control requires an integrated approach using as many control methods that suit the situation as possible. Follow up control after initial work is essential. It may take many years before a successful level of control is achieved.

Ensure prevention of further seed set or spread of seed. Landholders should first undertake control of individual or smaller isolated patches of Gorse, working back towards the larger infestations. Only by reducing and eventually eliminating the seed bank can Gorse be considered removed from a site.

Control methods can include grooming, slashing, burning, grazing, and herbicide. Physical removal where possible can be the most positive control method. Cutting of plants is not effective because strong regrowth occurs from the stumps.

In the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges region there are four Gorse biocontrol agents. These biocontrol agents will not eradicate Gorse because they require the survival of some plants to complete their life cycle. However when they are successful, biocontrol can have significant impacts on the ability of Gorse to thrive.

For advice on chemical control techniques contact the Natural Resources Centre in Kingscote or download the *Weed control handbook for declared plants in South Australia* for advice on chemical control:
http://www.pir.sa.gov.au/biosecurity/weeds_and_pest_animals/weeds_in_sa.

Declarations

The following sections of the NRM Act apply to Gorse on Kangaroo Island:

175 (2) Cannot transport the plant or anything carrying it

177 (1) Cannot sell the plant

177 (2) Cannot sell any produce / goods carrying the plant

182 (2) Landowner must control the plant on their land

185 NRM authority may recover costs for control of weeds on roadsides from adjoining landowners.

For more information

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