

Vermont Has Invasive Bedstraw
BY: Linda K. Schneider

Attention: Farmers, gardeners, land owners. Watch out for this invasive weed; SMOOTH BEDSTRAW.

This little invasive species is taking root in Vermont. Today is a good time to identify bedstraw in yards, hayfields, pastures and gardens. As you read this, bedstraw is in full bloom so it is very easy to find. If fields and roadsides look white with a tiny white wispy flower, you have identified the problem - bedstraw.

Smooth bedstraw is a weed that resembles sweet woodruff; both are in the madder family. Bedstraw has small white flowers, angled stems, opposite or whorled leaves. It is quickly crowding out native crop plants and ruining grazing animal's pasture lands. Cows won't eat it.

From the small farmer and gardener's point of view; it would be nice to know that a problem exists and then what are the options to take care of the problem. From a conservationist's point of view; rid our environment of invasive species and replant with native plants and grasses that our local wildlife know and like to eat.

Chuck Armstrong, Soil Conservationist at Ottauquechee Natural Resources Conservation Service says, "Local farmers have told me they started finding bedstraw in their hayfields after hay was brought down from Canada, about forty or fifty years ago."

The weed is introduced to new areas via small, numerous seeds. Haying and manure spreading, especially un-composted manure, can spread bedstraw seeds because it travels with equipment. People and animals moving from farm to farm can also be carrying small seeds on their feet.

If bedstraw has just arrived in your lawn, garden or pasture, pull it out. Make sure you get all the roots because they cluster and spread by underground stems.

Small gestures can make a big difference. Think about Smokey the Bear, "Only you can prevent forest fires." While this isn't a forest fire, it is a forced march. Caring about our properties is a number one priority in Vermont. Remember when visiting other farms and moving between your own fields, to power wash or broom off equipment and feet. Everyone is moving bedstraw.

The best examples of this type of practice are our local veterinarians who wash their boots or spray with disinfectant before they enter a new farm so they are not moving diseases. We have learned to wash our boats and canoes so we don't move aquatic invasive species such as milfoil. We can also learn to take these simple precautionary steps to stop bedstraw in its tracks.

One way to slow bedstraw down is to mow it before the seeds come out. The time for this action is NOW. It may need to be done twice this year, as the plant will try to re-flower again. Identify it as a major problem so you can till it and reseed your hay fields and pastures as soon as feasible. Don't forget to pay particular attention to fence lines that can harbor plants.

Armstrong says, "The good thing is the seeds are short lived, one to two years, so mowing the hayfield and pasture before the bedstraw goes to seed should reduce the seed bank. Mowing twice per season is recommended, ideally in June and again in August. Then tillage and reseeding is effective."

Herbicide is another possible choice, but it has its restrictions. Contact your local garden supply center and follow recommendations on the labels.

A great course of action would be: identify it, pull or mow it now and again before it goes to seed in August, then till and reseed next year. Make a plan to get rid of bedstraw, before it ruins gardens, lawns, pastures and hayfields.

If you need help identifying bedstraw call your local UVM Extension Service, local Conservation District, or The Vermont Nature Conservancy.

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