

Weed of National Significance: African boxthorn (*Lycium feroissimum*)



Above: Fruit of the African boxthorn.
Photo: Mark Imhof, DPI.

Left: Mallee Environmental Employment Program (MEEP) crews tackle the removal of an African boxthorn plant. Photo: Mallee CMA.

African boxthorn (*Lycium feroissimum*) is native to South Africa but was introduced into Australia during settlement years as it made for an effective boundary “fence” and windbreak between rural properties.

A hardy plant, African boxthorn is fast-growing and spreads along road ways and fence lines. It is present in the Mallee region and classified as a Regionally Controlled Weed and a Weed of National Significance (WoNS).

Problem

African boxthorn has invaded a wide range of vegetation types across southern Australia. Based on its invasiveness, impacts on biodiversity and potential for spread, African boxthorn is regarded as one of Australia’s worst weeds. The problem with African boxthorn is its invasiveness and its dangerous sharp thorns.

Dense infestations can out-compete native plants, invade watercourses,



At a glance

- African Boxthorn is a Weed of National Significance (WoNS);
- Dense infestations can out-come native plants, invade watercourses and seriously reduce a property’s stock-carrying capacity;
- Isolated populations have been found in the Victorian Mallee.

denying animals access to water, and can seriously reduce a property's stock-carrying capacity. The weed provides a breeding place for several pest insects including fruit fly.

The sharp thorns of the plant have been known to damage the eyes of grazing animals, as well as inflict painful injuries to humans. The red berries are toxic to humans and animals.

Description

African boxthorn is a perennial, woody shrub growing to 3-5 m high. Its branches are spiny, intricate and rigid. The slightly fleshy leaves are oval in shape, 7-25 mm long and clustered towards the tips of the branches.

The single, fragrant, tubular flowers are 10 mm in diameter, long-stalked and each have four or five rounded and spreading petal lobes which are pale lilac with darker purple centres. There are five stamens which protrude from the white throat of the flower. Flowers can be found at most times of the year, dependent on location.

The fruits are bright red berries that hang from the slender stalks. They contain toxic alkaloids and should not be eaten.

Dispersal

African boxthorn reproduces exclusively by seed. The seed is eaten by birds and becomes viable when excreted. African boxthorn is therefore often found where birds have perched, such as below trees, poles and powerlines.

It can also be spread from contaminated produce and materials. While seeding occurs between March and May, germination can occur at any time.

History

African boxthorn was originally introduced to Australia from South Africa around



Above: Mechanical removal of an African boxthorn plant. Care needs to be taken not to damage surrounding native vegetation. Photo: Mallee CMA.

1845, to be planted as hedges for fencing and windbreaks. In fact, in Victoria, the planting of African boxthorn hedges was a requirement of some early leases. It spread from the initial plantings and by 1904 was proclaimed noxious in parts of Victoria.

Control options

Chemical removal

There are a variety of herbicides available for use on African boxthorn when plants are actively growing. However, during the dormant phase (after the leaves have dropped), African boxthorn can only be controlled by cutting the plant off at the base and painting the stump with herbicide.

Mechanical removal

Mechanical removal and stacking of plants using a tractor and blade is an immediate way of cleaning up unsightly boxthorn infestations. Stacks should be burned according to fire restriction policies. There will be seedlings and other regrowth from where the plants were - continue to remove or chemically treat new growth until plants eventually give up.

Care needs to be taken to prevent vehicles or machinery from damaging surrounding native vegetation.

What you can do to help

Land managers can help prevent the spread of weeds on their property by:

- Maintaining vehicle hygiene to reduce spread of weeds by machinery and equipment;
- Minimising ground disturbance;
- Monitoring their property to detect new weeds early and eradicate them before they become established.

Further information

For more information regarding the African boxthorn, contact the Mallee Catchment Management Authority (CMA) on (03) 5051 4377.

References

The information for this fact sheet has been taken from the following resources: Department of Primary Industries (2012), Invasive Plant Classification, <<http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/agriculture/pests-diseases-and-weeds/weeds/other-declared-weeds/african-boxthorn>>.

North West Weeds, (2012), African Boxthorn, <http://www.northwestweeds.nsw.gov.au/african_boxthorn.htm>.

Project Partners



Published August 2012

This publication may be of assistance to you but the Mallee Catchment Management Authority refers readers to our Terms and Conditions, available from our website.

Printed on recycled Australian paper, made from pre- and post-consumer waste.