

Rhododendrons - Tackling a growing problem

Rowan Doff



Rhododendrons are a colourful group of flowering plants that have become a common feature of Highland gardens. But one particular species, *Rhododendron ponticum*, has taken over many of our wild places, aggressively pushing out native plants. 'Ponticum' was first brought to Britain in the 18th century, introduced by Victorian estates for its ornamental value and for use as a rootstock for new cultivated hybrids. Due to its ability to thrive in wet, acidic soils, it has spread rapidly across huge parts of the countryside, especially in the West of Scotland, where it is estimated it now covers around 7% of all woodland areas.

Why, you may ask, is this such a problem? *R. ponticum* grows in dense thickets, shading out virtually all life beneath it, eliminating native plants, mosses, lichens, fungi and all their associated wildlife. Once established, the mature plants can easily spread either by seed dispersal or by 'stem layering', where horizontal branches set down new roots and grow new bushes. As a result, vast forests can quickly envelop open hillside and woodland, suffocating many of the native species which would normally grow there. Encroaching plants can also damage forestry stocks, destroy grazing land and impede public access to the countryside.

In 2010, The Department for Food and Agriculture (Defra) estimated that invasive species in general cost the British economy at least £1.7bn per year from the loss of native wildlife and landscapes. In Scotland alone, we spent £10m between 2003 and 2013 attempting to eradicate invasive rhododendrons, but they continue to spread and degrade our countryside. So, what can be done?

There are several known techniques for controlling *R. ponticum*. Most commonly, plants are cut back to the stump, which is then treated with herbicide and the branches and leaves burned. Chemical spraying can also be applied over large areas. However, these techniques can have damaging effects on the surrounding environment and often require years of repeat treatment to be effective. A relatively new

method, devised in Morvern by the Lever and Mulch Partnership, aims to treat Rhododendrons in a much more long-lasting way. This technique makes use of the strong stems of the plant, removing all of the bud bearing material and avoiding the use of chemicals. Though initially more labour intensive than other techniques, Lever and Mulch has been found to be far more effective and complete in its removal of the species. Follow up treatment is normally recommended to catch any missed plants during the first phase.



Nevis Landscape Partnership staff have been trained in the Lever and Mulch technique and over the past five years we have been working with volunteers to remove invasive species from the local area. Though Glen Nevis is not as badly affected as other parts of the Highlands, there are a few concentrated areas where the plants have dominated. If they are not controlled, there is a danger they will spread and destroy the other plants and wildlife that Glen Nevis is so valued for.

It worth stating that not all rhododendrons pose such a threat. *Ponticum* is just one of a wide variety of rhododendrons, many of which do not spread invasively and can safely be grown in gardens. In some parts of the country, 'plant swap' schemes have been set up, where gardeners are encouraged to replace their invasive *ponticum* with less aggressive varieties. But, incredibly, *R. ponticum* continues to be sold by some commercial nurseries. Indeed, many people still find it attractive, with tourists often drawn to the Highlands in the summer to see the abundant flowers in bloom. A shift in public opinion is needed if we are to protect our native wildlife from being decimated by these plants. Nevis Partnership will continue to campaign and raise awareness, as well as working on the ground to make Glen Nevis a *Rhododendron ponticum* free zone. If you'd like to help us, check for an upcoming work party on the events page on our website, or make a donation at www.nevispartnership.co.uk/sponsor-a-tree.