

factsheet

Garden escape

carrion flower in South Australia



carrion flower

Carrion flower

Description

Carrion flower (*Orbea variegata*) is a succulent, native to South Africa, which grows as a dense clump of stems from 3 to 15 cm high, forming a mat up to 2 m across.

The species is quite variable, particularly the plant colour. When growing in the sun it is dark red-purple with cream tips, but can range to extremes of yellow and orange or a whitish, lime-green when growing in the shade.

The large attractive flower has yellow petals with dark red spots. Seed pods are banana-shaped but vary greatly in size from 1 to 2 cm wide and 8 to 16 cm long.

The seeds are about 5 mm long and are attached to a long (2 to 6 cm) silky pappus which can wrap itself around a shade providing plant. Although the large pappus makes the seed easily dispersed by wind, observations indicate that the seed is very easily disconnected from the pappus with the



The very attractive flower of carrion flower.

Project: determine the extent of distribution, method of spread and potential for spread of carrion flower, a succulent garden escape categorised as a 'no care' plant.

Participants: Eyre Peninsula Natural Resources Management Board.

Location: Whyalla, Upper Eyre Peninsula, South Australia.

VET sector resource: RTD5401A Define a pest problem in a regional or broader context.

slightest of pressure. For this reason it is often moved only a short distance.

The garden ornamental

Carrion flower, with its coloured foliage, attractive flower, and its 'no care' requirement, is popular with gardeners and collectors of succulents. On the Upper Eyre Peninsula, South Australia, it has been grown in the harsh arid climate by many households for its pretty flowers and ability to attract flies. When grown in a large pot or rockery a short distance from the house, it attracts flies away from the residence.

The garden escape

Carrion flower has a number of characteristics often associated with weedy plant species, including:

- ease of reproduction and spread via wind-blown seeds
- suitability to the environment
- lack of care needed to grow the species.

These characteristics have enabled it to 'jump' the garden fence and become established as an environmental weed.



The banana shaped pods of carrion flower.

There have been isolated cases reported of carrion flower escaping cultivation in Western Australia and Queensland. Only in the Whyalla region of South Australia has the species reached true pest proportions.

It has been recognised as a weed on the Upper Eyre Peninsula for over 30 years and has the potential to become a serious weed of the chenopod rangelands, which are dominated by saltbush (*Atriplex versicaria*) and bluebush (*Maireana* spp.).

Challenges facing carrion flower control

Conflict between ornamental and weed status

Legislation to limit the sale and movement of carrion flower will not work alone but, along with a program of community awareness, it would be useful, particularly in states where chenopod rangelands occur and carrion flower is not yet a problem.

Prevention of new incursions would be the most cost effective way to protect the rangelands. Further research to more accurately define the impact carrion flower has on the chenopod rangelands and native vegetation would be required.

Control treatments

Carrion flower is tedious to control as herbicides must be applied by a brush-applicator to all stems, rather than spray application, to kill the weed. Biological control would be the ideal method to use on a plant so difficult to locate and kill, however limited knowledge of the weed and lack of priority will make the selection of a control agent unlikely in the short term.

Follow-up herbicide treatments are almost impossible given that finding small outbreaks under bushes is difficult. This is going to be one of the key challenges to successful control.



A 'forest' of carrion flower seedlings emerging after a significant rainfall event.

Knowledge of biology and ecology

There still remain large gaps in the knowledge of carrion flower biology and ecology. Details on how climatic factors (such as frost, drought) limit or promote its multiplication and spread will help determine its potential range.

In South Africa it is a native to the west coast. This could be due to intolerance of frost but this has not been confirmed by research.

A better understanding of carrion flower biology will identify regions at risk if introductions occur. Areas currently thought to be at risk include chenopod rangelands in NSW (eg the Hay Plain), South Australia, Western Australia and far west Queensland. The Flinders Ranges, SA, particularly the northern end is also at risk.

Future actions

The risk of carrion flower becoming a widespread weed is high, although its relatively slow rate of spread makes it a lower priority on the national weed scene. A coordinated control program should be implemented now, while carrion flower incidence is not widespread.

Continued research to gain a better understanding of the biology of carrion flower is essential to develop control strategies and reduce its spread. In addition, a public awareness campaign is needed to discourage its further promotion as a garden plant and to raise awareness of its potential to become a significant weed.

For further information visit the Weeds CRC's website: www.weeds.crc.org.au

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