

Invasive Plants in Pennsylvania

Common Velvet Grass

Holcus lanatus



John M. Randall, The Nature Conservancy
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Background:

Common velvet grass was likely introduced several times into the United States since the 17th century as both a contaminant and intentional component of imported pasture seed mixes.

Range:

This species is native to temperate areas of Europe and Asia. Common velvet grass can now be found throughout North America (and Hawaii), with populations concentrated on the west and east coasts. It has also expanded its range throughout Asia, Africa, and Australia.

Description:

Common velvet grass is a tufted perennial grass reaching 1-3 feet in height. It may behave as an annual in the Atlantic Coastal Region. The root system is fibrous and concentrated at shallow depths. Its leaves are grayish and soft pubescent. In the Northeast, this species typically flowers from June to August. The robust inflorescence is often tinged with purple.



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Habitat:

Common velvet grass occupies a wide range of habitats, including pastures, grasslands, meadows, wetlands, open forests, and woodlands. Optimal growth occurs under moist conditions, particularly at acidic, low nutrient sites. It is often found in disturbed soil.

Biology and Spread:

This species is a notoriously prolific seed producer. Seeds are easily shed and dispersed by wind, water, animals, and mowing equipment. Clumps of common velvet grass expand through the development of prostrate rosette shoots, but recruitment of seedlings is the primary method of reproduction.

Ecological Threat:

Common velvet grass forms dense stands that can exclude other plant species. Through allelopathy, it may be capable of inhibiting the growth of native grasses.



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How to Control this Species:

Physical

Although labor-intensive and time-consuming, hand pulling is an effective control measure.

Mowing or grazing operations run the risk of spreading common velvet grass, unless performed intensively and outside of the flowering period. Cutting plants in early June can reduce inflorescence production.

Burning has a deleterious effect on this species, particularly when combined with grazing.

Chemical

A systemic herbicide, such as glyphosate, may be applied to infestations. Herbicide may be most effective in the spring or when the first seed heads appear, as translocation to the roots is likely at this time.

Common velvet grass is conspicuous in the early morning when dew is trapped in its velvety hairs. Marking populations at this time may help to focus control efforts and minimize impacts to non-target species. Common velvet grass is not easily confused with other grasses.



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References:

BugwoodWiki; http://wiki.bugwood.org/Holcus_lanatus

National Park Service; http://www.nps.gov/seki/planyourvisit/upload/2012_VelvetGrass.pdf

USDA Forest Service; <http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/graminoid/hollan/all.html>

For More Information:

DCNR Invasive Species Site; <http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/conservation/science/invasivespecies/index.htm>