

# THE MYRTLE SPURGE SCOURGE: TREATMENT AND RECOVERY

*As land management agencies wage war on myrtle spurge in the foothills, people living on the Wasatch Front need to do their part to protect the ecosystem.*

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Myrtle Spurge, an aggressive, invasive, highlighter-colored Eurasian succulent is overrunning the Wasatch Front. The plant evolved in a harsh, dry, rocky environment and is flourishing in the Utah foothills. It flowers early and is quick to suck up water and nutrients, outcompeting native plants and leaving great swaths of mountainside barren of any other plant life. Local herbivores like elk and mule deer can't eat it as it is poisonous to them. This plant has the potential to entirely transform the ecology of the Wasatch Front if we let it.

"The invasion is at a point currently where we need to take action now to limit its spread," said Robert Edgel, Central Region Habitat Restoration Biologist for the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.

Myrtle Spurge is heinous to remove by hand with extensive root systems and a toxic latex sap that can cause swelling and blisters, vomiting and diarrhea when ingested, and blindness if it gets in eyes. Even when it is successfully cleared from public land, it can quickly return, spreading from the properties of people who still have it in their yards.

"We have utilized hand pulling and digging for two years with very limited success. We then transitioned last year to using a herbicide mixture that kills the plant and also prevents young plants from growing from seed. We have had very good results," Edgel said.

But this kind of treatment has a cost. Potentially harmful herbicides including Roundup (glyphosate) are used to treat myrtle spurge. This can hurt native plants and animals in the area. Drones are also used to treat rocky and difficult to reach areas. In a drone treatment, all plants in the area are wiped out, not just the myrtle spurge.

"No treatment is ideal: spraying the chemical isn't really a good solution because of the impact it does have to native plants and pollinators, but you can't keep it growing in the ecosystem, so it really is a complicated invasive weed just because all the solutions really aren't ideal for a healthy ecosystem in the Wasatch," said Grace Tyler, Save Our Canyons Development Director.

Something that can help mitigate the effects of herbicide treatments is reseeding the treated area with native plants. This is a crucial way to balance the need to get rid of the plant and the other needs of the ecosystem.

“I think that the balance here truly is making sure that the reseeding mixture works,” Tyler said.

Even with reseeding, herbicide treatment is not sustainable as the only solution. It takes years for the land, plant communities, and pollinator populations to recover from a treatment. If myrtle spurge keeps coming back and an area needs to be treated again, healthy native ecosystems will never have a chance to develop. As long as myrtle spurge is growing somewhere, even as an ornamental plant in a garden, it will continue to spread and propagate into other yards, neighborhoods, and mountains. That is why efforts need to be made to remove it not only from public land but also from private land.

“We need the community to help us remove it from people's backyards otherwise our efforts to remove it from the wildlands will be in vain.” Edgel said.

Community education will play a huge role in this endeavor. Even though myrtle spurge is no longer available for purchase, it still exists on people's properties, especially in older neighborhoods. The Salt Lake County Health Department has a weed control program that has education resources and a myrtle spurge page with additional information. It is vital that people living on the Wasatch Front learn the impacts of letting this invasive plant remain in their ecosystem and recognize the importance of stewardship over the wilderness foothills.