

May Noxious Weed Spotlight:

Hoary Cress & Cheatgrass

Dear Neighbors,

It is springtime again (YEAH!!!) and that means the battle with noxious weeds has begun. Each month over the summer, we will bring you a few updates on weeds that are emerging in our neighborhood. These emails are chock full of links, resources and more.

This month, we are focusing on two noxious weeds that are important to pull and manage before they seed in June; Hoary Cress (White Top) and Cheatgrass (Downy Brome). These invasive plants spread quickly and threaten our local ecosystem – luckily, it's the perfect time to learn to identify and get rid of them.

Remember, it's springtime and a great time to plant native seeds and grasses to outcompete weeds. We recommend [Western Native Seed's](#) pinyon-juniper grasses and wildflower mixes. Also, our neighboring Rivendell Distribution has seeds and can make custom mixes for Elk Springs.

Hoary Cress

Hoary Cress (aka Whitetop) is a creeping perennial native to Europe that forms dense patches that return and spread each year. It grows clusters of white flowers and heart-shaped seeds and is often accidentally in construction fill or landscaping soils.

It blooms in early spring – now is the time to identify it before it sets seeds in June. It's hard to get rid of because it spreads underground through its root system.

Why Is this an Issue?

Whitetop is in Elk Springs already, but it's often brought in via landscaping soils or inadvertently on tires and shoes from infested areas. Once it's established, it's insidious.

It displaces native vegetation like other grasses and perennials, wildlife don't eat it, and it's poisonous to livestock (not to mention an expensive problem in neighboring agricultural fields).



Garfield County lists Hoary Cress or Whitetop as a Noxious Weed; it is a priority for eradication.

Identification

We strongly recommend the [Pitkin County noxious weed ID directory](#) for identifying noxious weeds. The [Hoary Cress](#) page has info on identification, what you can do, easily confused plants, and more.

BUT WAIT! We want to make it easy for you to identify noxious weeds in Elk Springs. [Watch](#) our neighbor Claudia teach you about some Elk Springs Whitetop infestations.

What Can You Do?

- Hand-pulling is effective for small patches, especially before flowering.
- Use herbicides like Roundup on large patches or stubborn spots.
- Ensure the root system is entirely removed to prevent regrowth – dig out and remove soil if necessary
- **MOST IMPORTANT!** Alert your landscapers to be vigilant about soil they bring in, planting and weeding, and in some cases, even washing tires and equipment can reduce spread of accidental seeds.

Cheatgrass (Downy Brome)

Cheatgrass (aka Downy Brome) is known as the ‘scourge of the west’. It is an annual grass that has taken over millions of acres in the US, reducing crop yields, outcompeting native plants, and driving fire risk up.

We are currently working to eradicate cheatgrass in Elk Springs along our roads and open spaces. It’s very common throughout our neighborhood – and luckily manageable in spring.

Why Is Cheatgrass or Downy Brome an Issue?

Because it emerges early in the spring, it “cheats” other vegetation by being the first to germinate, crowding out native grasses and usurping available moisture from other plants. And because it dies off in early summer, the remaining mats of dry vegetation become potent tinder for wildfires.

Although cheatgrass appears in every state, it found a niche in Western rangeland where it filled the void left from livestock grazing on native vegetation. Cheatgrass has been a problem since the early 1900’s.



It can be seen near our gate, mailboxes, along Elk Springs drive, fire roads, and trails – and in the disturbed soils under thinned pinyon-junipers. The green spring grass quickly turns to a reddish-brown when it dies off by July, only to have a second growth in early fall.

Once seeds are set, the barb-like seeds (called awns) lodge in the eyes, ears and gums of livestock and pets. And yes, they are sure to be found in your shoes and socks too.

U.S. Forest Service research shows that cheatgrass can cover a square yard with as many as 25,000 seeds. Its effect on croplands is significant. Even a moderate infestation in a wheat field can cut yield by as much as 50 percent, and between our firefighters and neighboring farmers, there is a lot of discussion in the Roaring Fork Valley about managing cheatgrass.

Identification

We strongly recommend the [Pitkin County noxious weed ID directory](#) for identifying noxious weeds.

The [Downy Brome](#) (aka cheatgrass) page has great info on how to spot it, what you can do, easily confused plants, and more.

BUT WAIT! We want to make it easy for you. [Watch](#) our neighbor Claudia identify tiny emerging cheatgrass in Elk Springs.

What Can You Do?

- Hand-pulling is effective for small patches as soon as you spot them
- Remove and dispose of plants with seeds in landfill, not compost or yard waste
- Mowing before seeds set can also help control its spread (DO NOT MOW ONCE SEEDED!)
- Herbicides like Roundup for large patches - but application must be timed perfectly since cheatgrass germinates in both fall and spring – herbicide needs to penetrate roots before flowering and seed set.
- There is promising research into biological controls like fungus and soil amendments, so fingers crossed for continued future research in this vein

Neighbors, the best way to stave off cheatgrass is to eradicate what you can. For longer term prevention, plant native seeds (and get them established) to outcompete it.

Finally, you can always learn more about Colorado's Noxious Weeds, programs, and control measures at [The Colorado Department of Agriculture Noxious Weed Resources](#) .

Weed on,

The Elk Springs Noxious Weed Working Group



