

Now's a Good Time for Sericea Lespedeza Control

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Sericea lespedeza (or just sericea for short) is a non-native invasive legume. Like far too many other weedy plants it was intentionally brought to this country from Asia and planted for erosion control, hay production, wildlife cover and food. It was introduced into the United States in 1896 in North Carolina. The USDA started researching it in 1924 and ultimately several varieties were released for general use as hay and erosion control. It was strongly promoted in the 1950s, I even still have a USDA bulletin in my files extolling the virtues of sericea with establishment and management recommendations. It wasn't really identified as a weed issue until the early 1980s and was declared a noxious weed by the state of Kansas in 1988. But by then the genie was out of the bottle.

As I visit with county agents in the southern US, they will still use sericea as a livestock feed and have good consumption and palatability from livestock with it. But clearly something has happened as the plant went "feral". We find that the stands of sericea may be grazed lightly during early growth in the spring but high levels of tannins in the plant later in the growing season makes it highly unpalatable. If sericea is hayed, though, levels of tannin diminish and cattle will eat it readily.

Sericea blooms late in the growing season and can be a prolific seed producer. Like many legumes, it develops a small hard seed that can lay dormant in the soil for several years. This seed bank makes it a challenge to control as there can be new seedling for years after the original stand is controlled. Additionally, burning pastures tends to scarify the seed stimulating it to germinate and the lack of vegetative cover enhances seedling establishment. The plant grows best in areas with 30 inches or more of precipitation annually, but it has still been found in at least 73 of Kansas' 105 counties.

Controlling sericea is a long term process that will invariably involve herbicides. Heavy grazing by goats, especially in late summer, can help reduce seed production and reduce vegetative growth, but it has yet to been shown to kill sericea. We've started using late summer burns to also keep it from producing seed. This can also create a good situation where chemicals can be used late in the summer as it regrows from a burn. Many native forbs go dormant after a summer burn so we may see less damage to desirable broadleaf plants from the herbicides.

Ultimately we find that a two pronged herbicide approach over a number of years gives us the best option at control. We use treatments containing the herbicide triclopyr in June and July. At this time it is fairly easy to find the plants and also is a good time to control new seedlings and reduce vigor of established plants.

A late summer treatment (September), when the plant is blooming, with a metsulfuron herbicide, will greatly reduce seed production and also further reduce seed production. *Sericea* has small, but obvious, white flowers that are borne right next to the stem, in the leaf axils, in September which makes it easy to identify. As stated earlier it will take several years of treatments to get large established stands under control and then routine observation over the next decade to look for new seedlings from dormant seed.

Sericea lespedeza is present in our area and growing in acres of infestation but it can be controlled with diligence and perseverance. For more details go to the following web page: <https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/mf2408.pdf>