

The daphne laurel invasion of Gabriola



Daphne laureol (*Daphne laureola*) is now spreading so fast on Gabriola Island, it has likely reached the point where it will never be eradicated. You can find completely isolated plants, deep in the forested parts of the island, where there are no trails and few people venture. These would have sprung from seeds dispersed by birds. Once the plants have a foothold, they are probably spread locally by mice and voles, and it takes only a few years for the density of the plants to challenge the native population of Oregon grapes (*Mahonia nervosa*, *M. aquifolium*), and salal (*Gaultheria shallon*).

The only way this advance could be halted that I can see is the development of a genetically modified invertebrate of some kind that would love to eat it. Given the disinterest most people show in trying to control far-more-easily-controlled and roadside-accessible tansy ragwort (*Senecio jacobaeae*); the ineffectiveness of most broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) control measures, Drumbeag excepted; and the, to-my-mind, absurd reluctance on the island to use herbicides as weapons in the fight, I'm sure the battle against daphne laureol has been lost.

What is particularly galling is that despite warnings of the highly poisonous nature of this plant by WorkSafe BC and other organizations—

“...almost all parts of the plant are highly poisonous to humans and pets. The leaves, bark and berries are toxic when touched or eaten, and can cause skin irritations, blistering, swelling of the tongue, nausea and even a coma...”

—commercial harvesting for florists, albeit with a claimed “BC government licence” (although the government says it has no knowledge of such) to do so when landowners’ give permission (despite harvesters sometimes having no knowledge of who they are), goes on in a manner that, I think, only encourages its spread.



The leafy part at the head of a major stem is clipped and bundled for shipping off the island, and the response of the plant is to send up three or more side-shoots that within a year are as big as the single stem that was clipped.

older clippings

The plant quickly becomes bushier, and because the lower stem and roots are left intact, they thicken and strengthen, thereby making it even more difficult for the plant to be removed.

clipped previous year

freshly clipped

Harvesters say the side-shoots do not flower for three years, by which time they are ready to be clipped again, which is why they have permission to do what they do. They are not allowed to take plants that are in flower as the pollen is such a strong allergen.

Personally, despite the expert opinion and apparent official approval, I remain a sceptic and think the idea that this commercial harvesting is helping to control the spread of this invasive weed is bogus. Once the plant has a strong root, it becomes almost impossible to destroy.



Addendum Spring 2021

Wildflowers help make spring a delightful time of the year, and in the forests on Gabriola, none more so than the white fawn lilies (*Erythronium oregonum*) and fairy slippers (*Calypso bulbosa*). Yet both are threatened by human activities; the former especially by the invasive plant, daphne laurel (*Daphne laureola*). While salal and Oregon grape may put up some resistance to the invasion, it is unlikely that the native lilies will be able to.

Fairy slippers are probably being threatened by the recreational activities of too many humans in the mossy woodland areas where they grow, but that's another sad story. ◇

