

PURPLE VELVET GRASS

Also known as London fog, Yorkshire fog

Holcus lanatus

Grass Family (Poaceae)

DESCRIPTION

Purple velvet grass is a distinctive perennial grass that forms clumps in disturbed areas and, in particular, in moist or mild coastal areas.

The soft, flat, gray-green leaves with velvety hairs grow up to 2 feet tall. The roots are fibrous.

REPRODUCTION

Seed production begins in the plant's second year of growth and tends to be prolific. Dense, purple-tinged inflorescences, reaching up to 3 feet, bloom from May to August. The spikes fade to white once the seeds have ripened, and the grass may go dormant after flowering. The wind-dispersed seeds germinate quickly and seedlings grow rapidly. Purple velvet grass also reproduces vegetatively by producing tillers in late summer.

IMPACT

Purple velvet grass appears to contain allelopathic compounds that inhibit native plant species. It also has cyanide compounds and may produce an allergic reaction in susceptible people. It dominates an area by forming dense roots that reduce the space available for other species to take up nutrients and water. It also produces significant amounts of thatch.

KEY FACTORS

- u Prolific seed production with most seeds germinating rapidly.
- u Seeds are not thought to be long-lived.
- u Rapid growth.
- u Cutting stimulates tillers.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Except for small, isolated populations, it may be extremely difficult to remove purple velvet



grass. Many practitioners have found prescribed burning, brushcutting, and grazing to be ineffective against purple velvet grass.

- u **Pull** clumps by hand before seed set, or **cut** them out from around the base with a paring knife. Near Tomales Bay, Audubon Canyon Ranch has had success using these techniques between January and April, prior to when the plant sets seed. The roots are 1½–2 inches on young plants, but can become deep and wide in maturity. Removing seedlings is preferred, because larger roots are more likely to break, especially when soil is dry.
- u **Scrape** larger infestations, or chop below the root crown, using the blade end of a McLeod.

Weed whipping the grass first may make scraping easier. Scraping is a control method to discourage seed production, so do it before the grass blooms. Regrowth and new inflorescences will grow close to the ground, so cut the grass as short as you can (1–2 inches off the ground) and be sure to follow up with repeat treatments.

- u **Mow** starting in late March before seed set and then repeat monthly until July. Friends of San Bruno Mountain use a high-wheel mower and a string trimmer to crop grasses close to the ground.
- u **Cut** small patches of grass back in early spring before bolting and **mulch** with 4–6 inches of rice straw, removing resprouts as they emerge.

DISPOSAL

Bag any hand-pulled grasses and dispose off-site.

FOLLOW-UP

Without constant vigilance, treated areas often become reinfested, so check frequently for seedling growth. Reseed or plant with native perennials: fast-growing bunchgrasses or forbs.

INTERESTING FACTS

This ornamental grass is thought to be native to southwest Europe. It was probably introduced to the States either accidentally as a forage contaminant or deliberately as part of a seed mix for meadows. The flowers are used in both dried and fresh flower arrangements. *Lanatus* is Latin for “woolly” and refers to the texture of the leaves.

Notes