

The Herald of Randolph

Wild Chervil is Driving Area Farmers Crazy, And They Haven't Figured Out What To Do About It

2000-07-13 / Front Page

By Sandy Cooch



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"This stuff is driving me crazy."

"There's no good news about this thing."

"I've been around a long time, and I've never seen a weed as aggressive as this."

The botanical bad actor referred to above is wild chervil, a fast-growing weed that has made Central Vermont its special playground, taking over roadsides, back lots, and farm fields.

The thumbs-down comments quoted above were made by some of the 16 or so folks who attended a three-hour program on the invasive plant in Randolph Center June 22. The program highlighted the level of concern about the weed, which was identified by the state only a year ago and is little known outside of Central Vermont.

The Randolph Center session, organized by local Extension Service agent Bill Snow, opened with a five-stop tour and concluded with a discussion led by UVM field crop specialist, Sid Bosworth.

The program drew a mixed bag of people, including a handful of Randolph Center farmers who have been trying—with little success—to stop chervil's inexorable spread from the roadsides into their fields.

At least two people at the meeting, Randolph Town Manager Mel Adams and a botanist from the state Agency of Transportation, were there to find out how wild chervil—which can reach heights of up to three to six feet by mid-June—affects their roadside mowing programs and budgets.

These folks also learned that mowing, once the plant has gone to seed, appears to be one of the primary ways that chervil is spread, as the equipment carries seeds ever further afield.

Several interested area residents also attended the meeting. Some said they were battling wild chervil on their own property, and others, like Victoria Webber of Bethel, expressed concern about the speed at which the rank-growing weed is squeezing out roadside wildflowers.

"It's eliminating bio-diversity," Webber said, who added that she has learned that the plant can also cause skin irritations.

Dairy Farms Featured

The tour included stops at two dairy farms—the Silloway and Beidler farms—and at the Vermont Technical College orchard, managed by Peter Leonard.

During the stops at their respective farms, Leonard, David Silloway and Brent Beidler each shared information on when and how wild chervil appeared and about their various attempts to stop or at least slow its advances.

Leonard, who said he first spotted the plant on Route 66, near Exit 4, about seven years ago, has watched the plant gradually push up the hill and onto VTC's dairy and orchard operations.

"My guess is the state highway mowers brought it here," Leonard said. Randolph town mowers, he said, likely helped to further spread the plant.

Both Leonard and Silloway said they had probably created their own chervil problems by using mowers that had been previously used for roadside cutting on farm fields and in the VTC orchard.

In just a few years, Leonard said, what started as a few plants in the orchard turned into "a major problem." Chervil, which spreads both by seed and, underground, by root, also grows so quickly that it effectively kills off surrounding vegetation by shading it.

Finding that mowing did little to stop the weed, Silloway and Leonard have begun to experiment with spot applications of various herbicides, at various stages of the plants' growth. They found, they said, that most of the attempts only temporarily slowed the plant.

Silloway confessed he had recently taken to ripping the tall weeds out by hand, "more out of frustration than anything." Even that, he said, doesn't accomplish much, thanks to chervil's deep root system, which keeps producing new plants.

Bieldler, who has an organic farm, said his milking cows won't eat chervil in the pastures, but his heifers will, "if pushed."

Makes Hay Inedible

Chervil is not just a summertime problem for farmers. Cows, the farmers agreed, "won't touch" cut hay that has chervil in it, and, because the stems are slow to dry, chervil can reduce crop quality, if harvested in forage, due to molding.

Stewart Skrill, another Randolph Center farmer who attended the chervil program, suggested a novel solution: sheep. The chervil in his neighborhood, Skrill said, seems to stop at the edge of the fields he rotates his sheep through.

Sid Bosworth, an Extension Service forage specialist, said a state botanist first identified the plant, just a year ago, after David Silloway brought a specimen up to Burlington. Since then, Bosworth has been researching the plant, and he has recently produced a fact sheet on the problem weed.

Wild chervil, like Queen Anne's lace and poison hemlock, is a member of the parsley family. Many folks, he said, had been calling the plant "early Queen Anne's lace."

Central Vermont, he said, appears to have the worst infestation of the stuff in the state, though chervil has been spotted as far north as East Montpelier.

Bosworth explained that wild chervil, as a biennial, normally produces seeds during its second year. However, if the plant is mown before it goes to seed, he said, "it becomes a short-lived perennial" which then aggressively spreads "vegetatively," sending out multiple lateral roots from its six-foot tap root.

The tall, wild chervil plants, which blanketed many area roadsides with a frothy white bloom in mid-June, have already gone to seed. The plants—each bearing hundreds and possibly thousands of seeds—are now turning an unattractive yellow-brown.

Stops at Town Line

The chervil tour also included stops at two roadside infestations. One particularly thick growth, on Route 14 in North Randolph, stopped abruptly at the Brookfield line.

That difference is likely due, Bosworth believes, to the fact that different mowing equipment is being used on either side of the line.

Bosworth noted that he has also seen a town line difference between Hancock and Middlebury on Route 125. The Hancock side of the mountain is "loaded with" wild chervil; the Middlebury side is virtually free of it, he said.

Brookfield, Bosworth added, may still have a chance to stop wild chervil "in its tracks."

However, the mowing issue won't be a simple one for towns, notes Randolph Town Manager Mel Adams.

"Practically speaking, if you mow early enough to catch the seeds," he said, "then you have to go back and mow a second time," which would double the town's cost.

And, Adams said, since early mowing of chervil apparently encourages its spread underground, it's not even clear that frequent mowing is the best approach.

Using chemicals, he added, would also be costly, and would likely cause an outcry from residents.

Given all that, Adams said, the town would not likely change its mowing schedule until the state recommends a particular course of action.

Bill Snow, who set up the chervil workshop, noted that the pushy plant has also found its way onto many residential lots in Central Vermont towns. He urged landowners to help control the weed by cutting it before it releases its seeds.

More information on wild chervil may be found on a website maintained by Bosworth: pss.uvm.edu/vtcrops (click on "Pests"; requires Adobe reader.)

Or call Snow's office, 728-1581, to receive a copy of the fact sheet.

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