

# Dodder is a weed that can threaten landscape

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

I received several calls last week regarding a weed that truly fits the role of a monster movie character; and, where it occurs, it can be a really serious problem on various plants around the home.

My most recent phone call on this distinctive viny weed concerned the row of olean-ders growing along the southbound frontage road area near the intersection of Interstate 45 and state Highway 6 in Bayou Vista.

So, this week's column is a homeowner's warning about this unusual weed that has no leaves and is a true parasite. It is known as dodder.

Why do I label it as a monster movie character? Just the fact that it also is known by any of several rather colorful names — strangle weed, pull-down weed, devil's hair, love vine, hellbind and hellweed — provides a definite clue. You can simply call it trouble.

No matter what you call it, dodder not only is a weed, it is a true plant parasite, which means it must depend entirely on other plants for its food and water supply.

The darn thing even lacks true leaves — it is simply a vine that twines or coils around the stems and petioles of suscep-

tible plants.

I would not rate dodder as a very common problem in our growing area, but where it does occur, it can pose a very serious threat to various plants around the home.

So, be alert about this rather unique weed.

Dodder obtains its food from its host plant by producing specialized root-like structures that grow into the host plant and directly taps into the host plant's vascular system or bloodstream.

Once it gains a foothold, it soon forms a densely matted, hair-like growth. By the time dodder becomes noticeable, the thread-like stems are bright yellow to bright orange in color.

Even if dodder is not a problem now, it is good insurance to be able to identify it and know how deal with it early — once it is well-established in a site, you'll fully appreciate why one of its many names is hellbind.

This parasite is not picky about its host plants as it will attack a wide range of broad-leaf plants in the home landscape including many perennials, flowering annuals, vegetables, and so on.

Where dodder is concerned, there certainly is no honor code among weeds, as it also includes many types of broad-leaf weeds on its list of fair



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game for food sources.

Since dodder is a true parasite and obtains all of its food directly from green plants, it generally does not kill its host plant. This would be logical, as Mr. Spock would surmise, because for dodder to totally wipe out the very thing that it is totally dependent upon would be suicide.

However, affected plants are seriously weakened, stunted and might even fall over. During a single growing season, if several closely-spaced plants are infected, the plants in the center might be killed.

If left alone, infestations of dodder will continue to expand in size so long as there are suitable hosts to support its spread. Worse yet, the longer dodder is allowed to become well-established, the more difficult it is to control.

In past years, I've also noticed it on broadleaf weeds growing in pastures along highways where it typically looks like patches of yellow-colored blankets often extending several feet in diameter. Not so during this year's record drought, as weeds in pastures are struggling.

Dodder plants already have started producing a profusion of white- to cream-colored flowers during the late summer.

In fact, the flowers produce an abundant supply of seeds which will germinate next spring and start the cycle all over.

In such instances, dodder can continue to be a problem year after year because seeds remain viable for several years.

Control is somewhat relatively simple for the home gardener — remove the host plant(s) affected along with the

dodder (before flowering takes place) and dispose of it all by trash pickup.

An exception is woody ornamentals such as oleander. If you get to it early enough on shrubs, you might be able to control dodder by removing only the area of shrub growth enmeshed with the stringy growth.

However, effective control also can be a little tricky, as you must not leave any sections behind because any stem pieces left will start to produce new growth.

Since sections of the vine are directly attached to the host plant, you just can't pull it off without leaving some sections behind.

