Alien Plant Invaders: Spurge Laurel

In some areas of Salt Spring Island, there are many attractive rhododendron-like plants growing vigorously in both open and wooded areas. Unfortunately, these are aggressive garden escapees with very toxic leaves and berries. They spread rapidly through yards and woods, creating dense stands and shading out all other plants.

Spurge Laurel (AKA Daphne) is has become widespread throughout southwestern B.C. in recent years. It is recognized as a serious threat to local ecosystems, because it can grow in shady, undisturbed forest areas. It also poses a significant human health risk, especially to children, since eating just 7 to 10 berries can be fatal.

Spurge Laurel can be removed at any time of the year, but be sure to avoid spreading any berries that may be present.

Spurge Laurel (*Daphne laureola*)-Quick Facts about this *Hazardous* Horticultural Bully

Identification: Plants are evergreen shrubs, 60-180 cm (24-72 inches) tall, living up to 40 years. They look similar to Rhododendron, with clusters of oblong, waxy leaves, light greenish-yellow flowers in early spring; green poisonous berries ripen to black in summer.

Impacts: A serious public health risk due to toxicity of all plant parts. Spreads rapidly and grows densely in undisturbed as well as disturbed areas; shades native plants, thus displacing them and reducing biodiversity.

Found: In moist, partial to full shady areas and forest understory, especially near urban and residential areas.

Spreads: Seeds in the berries are distributed long distances by birds and rodents; also spreads by underground lateral roots.

Control: Remove plants before they form seeds if possible. Pull small plants when soil is moist. Larger plants must be cut beneath the soil surface, below where the brown stem changes to orange, or they will re-sprout. Often stems lie along the ground and need to be pulled up to find out where they are rooted before cutting. Monitor sites yearly after treatment to remove seedlings and sprouts. Most seeds germinate within 2 years.

CAUTION: Wear gloves, long sleeves and goggles as many people experience skin irritation and blistering on contact with leaves or sap. Wash hands, clothes and gloves afterwards. Avoid transporting cut plants in enclosed vehicles as airborne sap droplets can cause eye and throat irritation. Symptoms of poisoning from eating berries or bark include burning in the mouth, swelling of the tongue and lips, thirst, difficulty swallowing, nausea, vomiting, bloody diarrhea, weakness, coma and death.

FIRST AID: If any plant part is eaten, induce vomiting and consult a physician immediately. If sap contacts mouth or eyes, flush with large amounts of water and consult a physician. If sap contacts skin, flush with lots of water. If a rash develops, treat with anti-inflammatory cream and if it persists, consult a physician.

Disposal: Put cut plants in tarps or bags to avoid spreading seeds and reduce irritation from airborne sap droplets. Take to landfill. Do not compost. Do not burn or chip plant parts as noxious chemicals will be released into the air.

Alternatives to Plant: *Note: * indicates drought tolerant plants*

Native Plants:

Western Rhododendron; Evergreen Huckleberry*: Full or part shade, moist conditions
Low Oregon Grape*; Salal*; Sword Fern*: Full or Part shade, moist or dry conditions
Falsebox; Tall Oregon Grape*: Part shade or sun, moist conditions

Non-Invasive Ornamentals:

Fragrant Sweet Box: Full or part shade, moist or dry conditions
***Daphne odora*; Burkwood Daphne**: Part shade or sun, moist or dry conditions
Daphnoides Rhododendron*; Delavay Osmanthus*; **Japanese Evergreen Azalea**: Part shade or sun, moist conditions