

Controlling That Invasive Crownvetch

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

This time of year I am frequently asked to identify that pretty pinkish white flower covering some of the roadsides. That usually turns my smile into a snarl and I try to keep from adding a few cuss words when I say "crownvetch!" Yes, it is pretty, but beneath that blanket of blossoms lies an evil nasty invasive plant.

We (as a society) have often totally messed up the ecosystem with good intentions. After all, humans have to know better than Mother Nature, right? We are responsible for bringing such wonderful plants as sericea lespedeza and kudza to this country as well as beneficial insects like the multicolored Asian lady beetle. With a stellar track record like that, it is no surprise that crownvetch was an intentional introduction as well.

Crownvetch (*Securigera varia* or *Coronilla varia*) is native to areas of southern Europe, northern Africa and southwest Asia. It was introduced to the US in 1869 and found growing on poor soils in Pennsylvania in 1935. By the 1950s it was being heavily used for erosion control and planting on mined land reclamation areas. It is a perennial plant in the pea/legume family. It is not a true vetch, like hairy or common vetch, and really doesn't have very good value as a forage crop due to high levels of tannin. It's real use has come in controlling erosion on road cuts and to stabilize steep banks. It has been routinely used by state highway departments who probably account for a vast majority of the crownvetch that has been planted.

Yes, it does do a very good job of reducing erosion. Yes, since it is a legume, it adds nitrogen to the soil. That's about where this pretty picture heads south. It grows via creeping stems that can be anywhere from two to six feet long. It produces a lot of seed. Like most legumes, the seed can lay dormant in the soil for up to 15 years before sprouting. It also spreads by vigorous rhizomes. One small plant this year becomes a small patch next year which becomes a large monoculture a few years later. As it spreads it quickly outgrows where it was originally planted moving into all areas around it. Because of its thick growth it starts shading out native vegetation, replacing it with even more crownvetch.

It is classified by most states as a non-native invasive weed and is listed as a noxious weed in several states. If you have it on your property you should start trying to kill it to prevent its further spread. Pulling may be effective on small seedlings but probably not practical for large established plants. Regular mowing can help reduce it's vigor but ultimately we are probably looking at herbicides to get it under control.

It is unlikely that you will obtain 100% control with one treatment of any herbicide. 2,4-D is one product that we regularly use. Triclopyr will probably give you better control. Triclopyr is often found in homeowner products labeled for chickweed and clover control. For ag use, look for Remedy, Crossbow and others. Another option for agricultural uses is the active ingredient clopyralid. Clopyralid is very specifically active on legumes so will be safer on non-legume native broadleaf plants but clopyralid is most often found in premixes with other herbicides like 2,4-D and triclopyr. Milestone is another newer product with good activity on crownvetch. Some of these products do have some restrictions so read the label carefully.

Good intentions aside, planting crownvetch was and is a mistake. If you don't have it, don't plant it. If you do have it, get to work now to eradicate from your property for the sake of all the native vegetation!