

The daphne laurel invasion of Gabriola



Daphne laureol (*Daphne laureola*) is now spreading so fast on Gabriola Island, it has likely reached the point where it will never be eradicated. You can find completely isolated plants, deep in the forested parts of the island, where there are no trails and few people venture. These would have sprung from seeds dispersed by birds. Once the plants have a foothold, they are probably spread locally by mice and voles, and it takes only a few years for the density of the plants to challenge the native population of Oregon grapes (*Mahonia nervosa*, *M. aquifolium*), salal (*Gualtheria shallon*), and sword fern (*Polystichum munitum*).

The only way this advance could be halted that I can see is the development of a genetically modified invertebrate of some kind that would love to eat it. Giving the disinterest most people show in trying to control far-more-easily-controlled and roadside-accessible tansy ragwort (*Senecio jacobaeae*); the ineffectiveness of most broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) control measures, Drumbeq excepted; and the, to-my-mind, absurd reluctance on the island to use herbicides as weapons in the fight, I'm sure the battle against daphne laureol has been lost.

The future understory will be greener.

What is particularly galling is that despite warnings of the highly poisonous nature of this plant by WorkSafe BC and other organizations—

“...almost all parts of the plant are highly poisonous to humans and pets. The leaves, bark and berries are toxic when touched or eaten, and can cause skin irritations, blistering, swelling of the tongue, nausea and even a coma...”

—commercial harvesting for florists, albeit with a claimed “BC government licence” (although the government says it has no knowledge of such) to do so when landowners’ give permission (despite harvesters sometimes having no knowledge of who they are), goes on in a manner that, I think, only encourages its spread.



older
clippings

clipped
previous
year

freshly
clipped

The leafy part at the head of a major stem is clipped and bundled for shipping off the island, and the response of the plant is to send up three or more side-shoots that within a year are as big as the single stem that was clipped.

The plant quickly becomes bushier, and because the lower stem and roots are left intact, they thicken and strengthen, thereby making it even more difficult for the plant to be removed.

Harvesters say the side-shoots do not flower for three years, by which time they are ready to be clipped again, which is why they have permission to do what they do. They are not allowed to take plants that are in flower as the pollen is such a strong allergen.

Personally, despite the expert opinion and apparent official approval, I remain a sceptic and think the idea that this commercial harvesting is helping to control the spread of this invasive weed is bogus. Once the plant has a strong root, it becomes almost impossible to destroy. ◇

