

## **A Response to Comments in the Press on *Rhododendron ponticum***

*Rhododendron ponticum* is found chiefly in the wild in the Caucasus and N. Turkey, and in isolated pockets in Portugal and S. Spain. It was one of the first rhododendrons to be introduced into Britain, in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, with its ubiquitous purple to pink flower. Subsequently in the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Rhododendron ponticum* was planted not only for ornamental purposes but also to provide shelter, game cover and has been used as a hardy under-stock for grafting many hybrid rhododendrons.

*Rhododendron ponticum*'s capacity to naturalise itself has created much bad press and sometimes uninformed publicity. It is an invasive plant, spreading relatively slowly by seed and by layering. In favourable conditions it can over a significant number of years cover wide areas, seriously disrupting the biodiversity of natural habitats and ecosystems. It is also one of a number of hosts to *Phytophthora ramorum* and *Phytophthora kernoviae*, which are major threats to both the forestry industry and to gardens. Its capacity to quickly put on fresh growth, having been cut back to the ground, means it requires grubbing out or chemical treatment for effective eradication.

Legislation in Scotland classifies *Rhododendron ponticum* as an invasive species that cannot be offered for sale commercially and which, if possible, should be eradicated. Forestry Commission Scotland, for instance, in 2011 launched an action plan "to free the national forest estate of rhododendron". This is estimated to cost £15m and take to 15 years to achieve, with £1.6m being allocated for the year 2011-12 (News Release No. 14783). Forestry Commission Scotland acknowledges that this is an ambitious programme.

Research commissioned by Forestry Commission Scotland in 2008 estimated that in Argyll and Bute *Rhododendron ponticum* covered 4,654 ha, of which 85% was in woodland. However, the report (Edwards C. and Taylor S. "A survey and strategic appraisal of Rhododendron invasion and control in woodland areas in Argyll and Bute" Roslin 2008) indicated that the area identified as being covered by *Rhododendron ponticum* was significantly underestimated. To eradicate *Rhododendron ponticum* from the identified areas only was estimated (2008 prices) to cost £9.3m. The report also highlighted the problem of re-invasion and spread from untreated areas, so that without comprehensive eradication the areas of *Rhododendron ponticum* could increase rather than decline, with cost rising substantially for its eventual clearance, if achieved.

Given that there are substantial areas of Scotland, in addition to those in Argyll and Bute, which are affected by *Rhododendron ponticum* it is clear that a high level of public investment will be required to eradicate this invasive species. In addition, while the Forestry Commission Scotland aims to free the national forest estate of *Rhododendron ponticum* this cannot be achieved without measures being taken to also to eradicate *Rhododendron ponticum* in areas outwith the parts of the country covered by its action plan. These other areas are owned by a multiplicity of interested parties with varying commitment and financial ability to eradicate this invasive species. Kintyre alone has vast areas covered by *Rhododendron ponticum*. Unless a comprehensive approach can be adopted it is likely that the limited amount of funding earmarked for eradication in defined areas will be wasted.

*Rhododendron ponticum* is one species in a genus that contains over 1000 species of rhododendrons and countless hybrids that have brought pleasure to professional and amateur horticulturalists and garden lovers alike. None of the other species or hybrids have shown the ability of *Rhododendron ponticum* to spread invasively. The rhetoric of press releases fails to isolate *Rhododendron ponticum* as being the specific problem:

"FCS aims to be rhododendron free (in 15 years)!"

"Everyone needs to do their bit and report any rhododendron that they see..."

This failure to identify in the public's mind the specific cause of the problem, as well as the giving of very optimistic forecasts for its eradication, will undermine the campaign to eradicate this

invasive species from the Scottish landscape. In addition, misleading information on costs and the playing down of the risks of re-invasion will ultimately threaten future funding.

The problems of eradicating *Rhododendron ponticum* are enormous, as its capacity to survive clearance, re-grow and generate new seed in a relatively short time cannot be under-estimated. Ambitious targets and a lack of adequate funding will be counter-productive to achieving full eradication. The Scottish Rhododendron Society has called on the Scottish Government for the implementation of a national action plan for the permanent removal of the invasive species *Rhododendron ponticum* from the whole country. The action plan should be based on a realistic and open assessment of the scale and nature of the problems involved, engage the support of all the interested parties and land owners, be properly funded, be effectively managed; and implemented on the ground without eradicating or adversely affecting, all other Rhododendron species and cultivars that are not invasive or a threat to natural habitats or ecosystems.

Prior to commencing work on any eradication exercise, it is vitally important to carefully consider what use is to be made of the land being cleared of *Rhododendron ponticum*, as the ground will be devoid of all the nutrients. *Rhododendron ponticum* is one of very few plants that is able to survive on barren soil and, for this reason, it is likely that other invasive species will take over the area that has been cleared unless there is a plan in-situ for rejuvenating the soil and replanting.