

Fact sheet

Witchweed

What is Witchweed?

Witchweed is major parasitic weed of grain (especially summer crops) and sugar crops. The two species of concern are *Striga hermonthica* (or purple witchweed) and *S. asiatica* (Asiatic witchweed) neither of which is present in Australia. These two species can cause up to 70% grain yield losses and costing hundreds of millions of dollars overseas.

What does it look like?

Witchweed plants are short and spindly with colourful (white, red, yellow or pink) flowers. Witchweed has a large swollen root system, which attach to host plant roots by swellings called haustorium. Due to the parasitic nature of Witchweed, host plant symptoms are often seen before the Witchweed emerges from the ground. Host plant symptoms include yellowing leaves (chlorosis), wilting and stunted growth.

What can it be confused with?

The host plant symptoms caused by Witchweed can be confused with drought damage, nutrient deficiency or vascular disease.

What should I look for?

Look for host plant symptoms of yellowing leaves, wilting and stunted growth and the presence of the parasitic Witchweed. The Witchweed plants are short (30 cm) and spindly with colourful flowers and a large swollen root system.



S. asiatica flowers can be various colours

Chris Parker, CAB International



Witchweed are small spindly plants with colourful flowers

Florida division of Plant Industry Archive, Florida Dept. Agriculture and Consumer services. Bugwood.org



Drought like symptoms in a maize crop caused by Witchweed (*S. asiatica*)

Randy Westbrook US Geological Survey, Bugwood.org



Drought like symptoms in a maize crop caused by Witchweed (*S. hermonthica*)

USDA APHIS PPO Archive, USDA APHIS PPO, Bugwood.org

How does it spread?

Witchweed is mostly spread by contaminated seed. The seeds of witchweed are tiny (0.3 mm), almost dust-like and produced in their thousands. They can remain viable in the soil for over 10 years, so once established it is extremely hard to eradicate. Seed can also be spread with soil on machinery and boots.

Where is it now?

Witchweed is found in most tropical and subtropical countries in Africa, Asia and the United States of America.



Spraying is an effective control technique used in the USA

USDA APHIS PPO Archive, USDA APHIS PPO, Bugwood.org

How can I protect my farm from Witchweed?

Check your crop regularly for signs of Witchweed, especially if you or your neighbours have recently been overseas or bought seed/machinery from overseas.

Exercise caution when travelling or buying machinery or seed from overseas.

Make sure you are familiar with common grain pests so you can tell if you see something different.

If you see anything unusual, call the Exotic Plant Pest Hotline

**EXOTIC PLANT PEST HOTLINE
1800 084 881**



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