

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

ITALIAN ARUM



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Master Gardener

QUESTION: I have this beautiful plant growing in my garden, but I don't know what it is. It has large, arrow-shaped green and yellow leaves and then, in the late summer, stalks of bright red berries. Can you identify it and tell me a little about it?

ANSWER: What you have is called Italian arum (*Arum italicum*), also known as "Lords and Ladies," "Italian Lily," and "Cuckoo's Pint." Unfortunately, it is classified as a Class C noxious weed in Washington State and probably soon to be in Oregon as well. Native to Asia, Europe and North Africa, it was originally introduced to the United States as an ornamental. It was first documented in Washington State on San Juan Island in 2002, and now found in denser pockets west of the Cascades. It is also a problem on the east coast as well.

With its glossy, large, spade-shaped leaves that are often variegated in color, it spreads as a ground cover, offering interest and color in the winter. Leaves can reach up to 12 inches long. In the spring it produces a pale yellow flower with a fingerlike spadix and pale "hood" that resembles a calla lily flower, but having a smelly odor. Then in the late summer, after the foliage dies away, tall stalks bearing bright red berries shoot up from the base.

There are several reasons why Italian arum is classified as a noxious weed. Because it has thick underground tubers which store most of the plant's energy and water, it easily reproduces and spreads quickly, making it extremely difficult to control. In its second growing season, the plant will also put forth independent "daughter tubers." It's been known to spread in yard debris and contaminated compost, and into open natural areas spread by birds who drop the seeds from the berries. Once in open areas, it will shade out small native plants and keep other plants from getting established.

Also, all parts of the plant can cause severe skin irritation, illness, or death to people, livestock, and wildlife. Italian arum contains large quantities of calcium oxalates in the form of needle-shaped



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Italian arum looks pretty but it will soon be classified as a noxious weed in Oregon and is hard to remove.



The leaves of Italian arum.



A budding flower on Italian arum.

crystals occurring in the cells of all plant parts. It's these crystals that cause irritation upon contact and even death if consumed.

Italian arum grows in partial to full shade, and though preferring moist humus, it can easily tolerate drought once it's established. Escaped patches are now found in forests, disturbed urban areas, and near streams, rivers and wetlands.

So how to control Italian arum? As I said, this plant is extremely difficult to eliminate and may take multiple years of consistent management efforts to effectively control it. A 2-acre infestation on Lopez Island in the San Juans of Washington actually became worse after repeated mowings, digging, torching in the winter and covering the site with a heavy tarp. Carefully digging and removing the tuber and daughter tubers can provide a fair amount of control, but it will take many years of repeated digging. When the berries appear, you can cut and bag the stems with the berries to prevent seeds from being dispersed by birds. Dispose of all plant parts in a sealed bag and place in the trash. Be sure and wear protective gloves in order to protect your skin from its toxic properties. Don't move soil from areas of infestation to new areas or compost piles.

Plant native vegetation to help provide competition and reduce the spread of an infestation. It goes without saying that you should never introduce Italian arum to your landscape.

Chemical control is also an alternative should mechanical and cultural methods prove ineffective. Several herbicides like Roundup, Oust, Escort, Habitat, Dicamba, and 2,4-D kill the foliage if applied to the leaves in spring, but will not always damage the underground tubers. It may prove more effective to alternate products in follow-up treatments instead of using just one product each time. Be sure to read and follow the label on each product for proper safety protocols and rate recommendations before applying any herbicide (the label is the law), and wear proper protective gear.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmsg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the Oregon State University Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.