

Not All Alien Invaders Are From Outer Space



Leafy spurge presents
a threat to pastures and
rangeland for cattle.

Leafy Spurge
Euphorbia esula

Leafy Spurge, *Euphorbia esula*

Leafy spurge, a weed, was first found in the United States in Massachusetts in 1827. About 50 years later, it was found in New York, where it was described as rare. Five years after that, botanists spotted leafy spurge in several places in Michigan. The weed quickly moved westward and can now be found in every Northern State and as far south as Iowa. While it is believed to have originated in Asia, leafy spurge now exists worldwide with the exception of Australia. Currently, leafy spurge occupies about 2.5 million acres of land in North America, an area almost twice the size of Delaware.

Leafy spurge is a perennial plant. This means that its life cycle lasts more than 2 years. It can grow about 16 to 32 inches (41–81 cm) tall. Leafy spurge appears to flower in late May and early June, but these yellow bracts aren't true flowers. The real flowers don't emerge until mid-June and are small and green. These innocent-looking flowering plants usually produce 10 to 50 pods that contain 3 seeds each. When the seed pods dry out,

they explode. In this way, leafy spurge seeds can be thrown as far away as 5 yards (4.5 m). But it's not just the seed pods that account for the plant's explosive spread. Birds, animals, and even humans can accidentally spread the seeds.

Leafy spurge presents a threat to pastures and rangeland for cattle. Grass can't compete with leafy spurge very well, and when the grass dies off, the leafy spurge



expands onto its territory. Leafy spurge can increase the amount of land it takes to feed a cow by as much as 75 percent. Also, cattle prefer not to eat in areas infested by leafy spurge. They avoid this plant because all parts of it contain a white, milky, latex.

When the plant is injured, this latex will ooze out and seal the injury like a botanical bandage. The latex also burns and blisters the skin of cattle and people. Taken internally, the latex will cause severe irritation in the mouth and digestive tract of cattle. Leafy spurge, with its defensive latex, hardy nature, and ability to spread quickly, is one invasive plant that can take care of itself.

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