

# Beauty or Beast?

## *Rhododendron ponticum*



### Community Action for Rhododendron Management

This is a long-term project initiated by Lauragh Community Council, Tuosist, Kenmare in 2024. As of November 2024, the first stage is in progress which is to start mapping the location of *Rhododendron ponticum* in the South Kerry area with the help of members of the community using a smartphone App to record locations. This data will be shared with University College Cork (UCC), who developed the App, and the National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC).

UCC will use the App to fine tune satellite mapping software to identify *Rhododendron ponticum*. This combination of on the ground mapping by the community and satellite identification of infested areas can vastly speed up the progress of mapping projects. Allowing for eradication teams to focus on the most important areas. As the project progresses the mapping can contribute to identifying progress in eliminating the plant and where re-infestation is starting.

It is hoped that communities up the western seaboard of Ireland will also avail of the mapping App so that eventually, this scourge of a plant to native wildlife, is eliminated on this island.

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## WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Surely it is a **BEAUTY** with lovely heads of purple flowers in May?

Rhododendrons are beautiful but one particular species, *Rhododendron ponticum* (*R. ponticum*), loves the mild wet climate of western Ireland and its acidic peaty soils.



Its dense shrubby growth and glossy evergreen leaves reduce light and prevent the regrowth of native plants. It grows in full sun or dense shade, taking over natural woodlands and open land, and it can change the chemistry of the soil. Consequently, it reduces the land area available for farming, and the suitability of the land for native plants and wild animals. The leaves are poisonous to livestock if eaten by mistake.

*R. ponticum* grows quickly, reaching heights of 4 m or more. Large purple flower heads bloom in May and June on bushes over 10 years old. Each flower head can produce 3,000-7,000 seeds, which travel up to a kilometer in the wind, leading to rapid spread and establishment in new areas.

**So, we think it is a BEAST**



**Project Contributors**  
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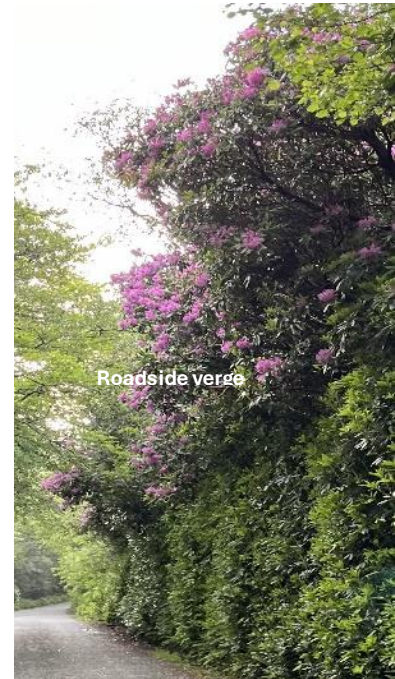
## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

**We need to get it under control** - Anyone who has seen *R. ponticum* along roadsides, in woodlands or up mountains can appreciate that controlling *R. ponticum* is a monumental and daunting task.

**But it can be done** – First, you need to kill the plant. Second, you need to remove the cut and dead wood. Third, you need to deal with the wood and brush.

**Killing** – Just cutting back *R. ponticum* bushes results in rapid and vigorous regrowth and needs to be repeated at least every five years to prevent flowering. Extensive trials by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NWPS) have shown a very targeted use of herbicide is the most effective way of killing off *R. ponticum*. The herbicide is sprayed directly into cuts in the trunk, which kills the bushes quickly and reduces the damage to nearby shrubs and trees.

**Dealing with the dead bushes** – They could be left in place to slowly rot down. This is unsightly and dead dry wood is a fire risk. Rotting and burning release the carbon from the wood into the atmosphere, which contributes to the emissions that drive climate change. The bushes, therefore, need to be cut and removed so they can be safely dealt with in an environmentally friendly and sustainable way. We believe using the wood to make Biochar is the best option with the least impact on the environment.



**We control the Beast.**



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## WHAT IS BIOCHAR?



Photo courtesy of [www.exetercharcoal.co.uk](http://www.exetercharcoal.co.uk)

**Biochar** is created by burning wood very slowly under controlled conditions in a special kiln. Biochar is similar to charcoal. The process is 75% less polluting than normal burning and there is minimal waste.

Biochar holds carbon for decades longer than decaying wood. It has many uses from soil conditioning to water purification to removing harmful pollutants in the environment. On-going research is discovering new uses regularly.

As a soil conditioner biochar provides multiple additional benefits. It reduces soil compaction, provides habitats for beneficial soil bacteria and fungi, and adsorbs contaminants such as unwanted pesticides.

A mobile biochar kiln can be moved and located close to the sites being cleared of *R. ponticum*. The resulting biochar could be returned to site to enrich the soil.

## The Beast becomes a bonus



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## WHAT IS OUR PLAN?

1. **Determine the current extent of the *R. ponticum* problem.** We are working with University College Cork to develop a smartphone and computer App for the community to record locations of *R. ponticum*. This will be especially useful for identifying where it is spreading into new areas.
2. **Organise work teams.** Train team leaders to kill and cut the *R. ponticum* bushes. They will then supervise teams of community workers and volunteer groups removing the wood and brush.
3. **Deal with the cut wood.** In the short to medium term, the larger pieces can be used for household heating instead of other fuels. Smaller branches and twigs can be shredded into woodchip for use in gardens. In the longer term we hope to prove that making Biochar is a more environmentally friendly and sustainable option.
4. **Plan and operate five-year follow-ups** of cleared land to deal with new (seed sown) or surviving plants.
5. **Conduct proof of concept** to show that using a mobile Biochar kiln is a viable and affordable way to deal with dead *R. ponticum*, minimising carbon release and creating a valuable resource.



**So, the Beast is transformed into a Beauty**

## WHAT CAN I DO?

**Help with mapping** by recording *R. ponticum* when you are out and about. To access the survey, visit one of these links

[rhodo.tuosist.ie](http://rhodo.tuosist.ie)

[www.tuosist.ie](http://www.tuosist.ie)

scan the QR code



**Get trained** to kill and dispose of *R. ponticum* in the most efficient way.

**Volunteer** to join a group in your area and take part in a Meitheal to map or help clear the plants.

**Email** [kerry.rhodo@gmail.com](mailto:kerry.rhodo@gmail.com) to go on the mailing list for courses, to volunteer, if you have *R. ponticum* on your land or to keep in touch with project developments.



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