

# Innocent gardeners proliferate devastating weed

By SCOTT KLINE

A biologist for the Grand River Conservation Authority is warning that a European plant could be "devastating" to local wetlands.

Likely introduced to North America in the early 1800s, Purple Loosestrife "has thrived at the expense of native wetland plants and has proliferated unchecked" in the northeastern United States and Canada.

A spokesman for the Credit Valley Conservation Authority, Ken Owen likened the spread of Purple Loosestrife to the spread of zebra mussels in the Great Lakes.

In a report to the GRCA's execu-

tive committee, Larry Roszell said the spread of Purple Loosestrife "is becoming an ever increasing threat to the wetlands of the Grand River Basin."

Averaging two metres (six feet) the plant — also known as spiked loosestrife, red sally, willow weed and rainbow weed — "prefers" wetlands, wet meadows, ditches riverbanks and other areas of moist soil exposed to sunlight, Roszell said.

"Purple Loosestrife has an amazing capacity to reproduce either by seeding, sprouting or cutting," he said.

A single stalk can produce 300,000 seeds and with up to 80,000 stalks per acre, a single mature plant can produce up to 2.7 million seeds in one year.

Scientists believe the Purple

Loosestrife seeds originally came from Europe in the wool of sheep or the ballast of ships.

Consequently the insects and predators that controlled its spread in Europe were left behind, Roszell said.

According to Owen, the CVCA spokesman, there are no natural North American controls for the plant, therefore "once it gets into an area it takes over."

He said in wetland areas where 15 or 20 plant species existed, once Purple Loosestrife gets started "there is one."

Roszell said Purple Loosestrife quickly outgrows native plant life and "can eventually replace up to 90 per cent" of the plant life native to a wetland area.

"It is devastating in that it reduces the diversity of plankton life

in the wetlands," Owen said. "It is basically useless to animal life."

Roszell added that as little as two years ago, "Purple Loosestrife was not apparent in most of the wetland properties owned by the GRCA."

But attempts to control the plant have met with "limited success," Roszell said.

Biologists have tried flooding, cutting, handpulling, digging and even burning the plant to try and control it.

"The incredibly prolific plant appears indestructible by these ordinary control methods," Roszell said.

"This stuff has been around for years but it now becoming a problem," he said.

Meanwhile, the GRCA will "work in close co-operation with other agencies in developing en-

vironmentally acceptable control measures," Roszell said.

Among the measures being considered is the introduction of three European insects that feed on Purple Loosestrife.

"The risk with any biological method of control is that the insects that are introduced...may begin devouring something more desirable," Roszell added.

Ironically, because the Purple Loosestrife is a "very beautiful plant" when blossoming, some southern Ontario garden centres have sold it to home gardeners, Owen said.

He added CVCA officials are monitoring the spread of the Purple Loosestrife and trying to "make people aware" of the problem so they do not "plant it in their gardens."

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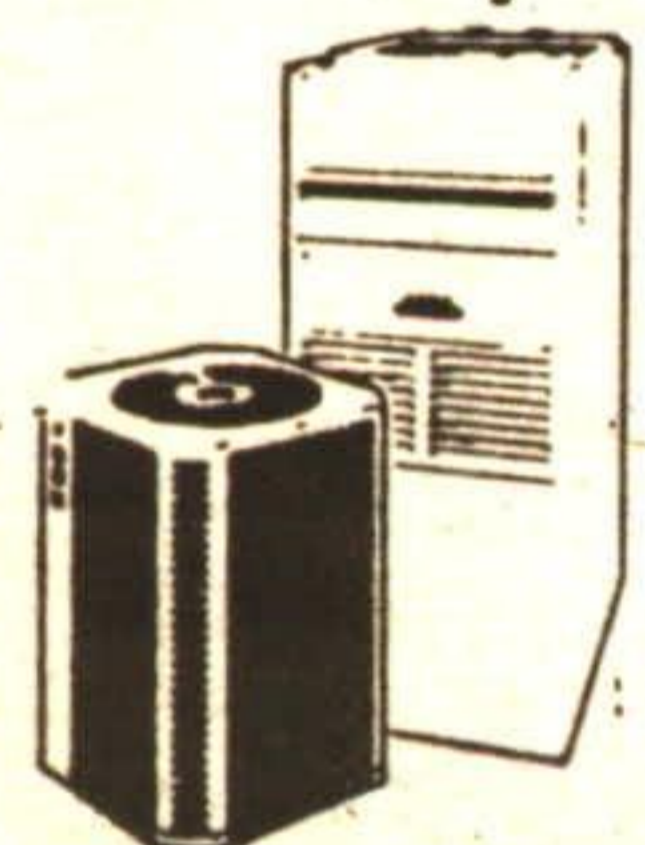


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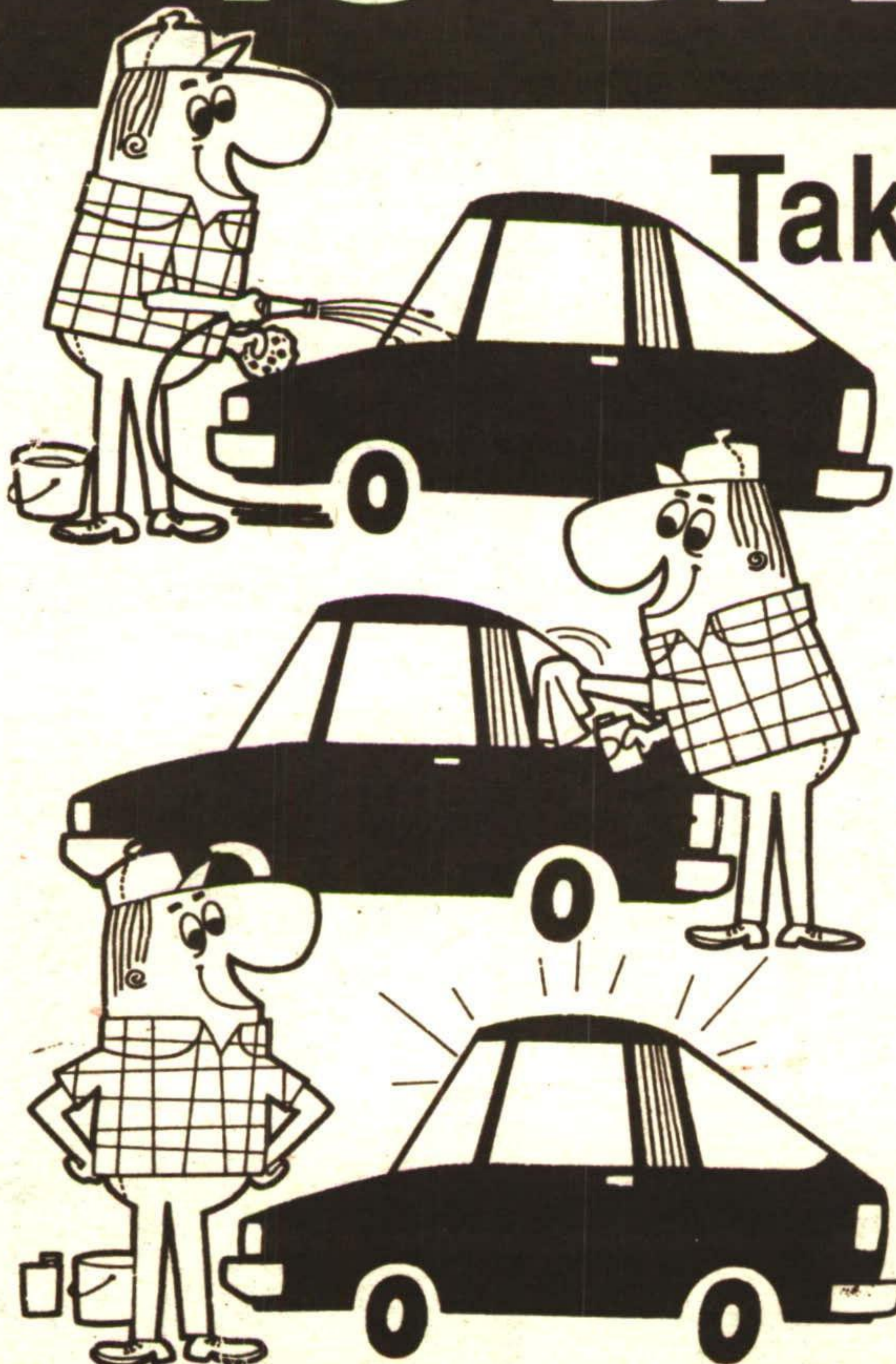
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