Factsheet
March 2005

Heather – one problem weed

About heather

Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) is a bushy, evergreen shrub that can grow up to 50 cm tall. It has small, dark green, stalk-less leaves that overlap along wiry stems. From December to March, small bell-shaped pink/purple flowers can be seen at the ends of the stems. Heather spreads both vegetatively and by seed.

Heather was once able to be sold. Now it has been deemed an unwanted organism under the Biosecurity Act 1993, making it illegal to sell, distribute or propagate heather within New Zealand.

Photo: P. Blaxter

Where is it a problem?

In the North Island, heather has become a major problem in the Tongariro National Park. It was planted to provide a food source and habitat for grouse that were planned to be introduced into the park as game birds. Although the birds were never released, the heather flourished and has now become a serious environmental weed.

Heather thrives in high-country tussock land and can be found growing in scrub, forest margins, riverbeds, wetlands, gardens and road edges. It can also tolerate the harsh climatic conditions of sub-alpine environments.

Heather has been found growing in Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park, on New Zealand Defence Force land near Tekapo and in private gardens within the MacKenzie Basin. DOC is gathering information to determine the extent of heather in the Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park and in the MacKenzie Basin. Please report all sightings of heather to the DOC Area Office in Aoraki/Mt Cook or Twizel.

Photo: P. Blaxter

WEEDBUSTERS

Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Why is it a problem?

Heather forms dense stands that shade and out-compete low-growing vegetation, making it an unsuitable environment for native flora and fauna.

Heather spreads easily. Heather seeds can become attached to footwear, clothing, machinery and animals. They are also wind dispersed, which allows the seed to be carried further afield, making it difficult to find and control. In good condtions, heather can re-sprout from branches lying along the ground. It is difficult to kill heavy infestations of heather without damaging valuable native species.

What can you do?

If you come across heather growing in the wild, please:

- Report any heather sightings to the Aoraki/Mt Cook DOC Visitor Centre or the Twizel DOC Area Office.
- Avoid walking, driving or pitching tents on areas that have heather growing on them as these are all means of further spreading this weed.
- Let others know the importance of stopping heather from spreading into our conservation areas.

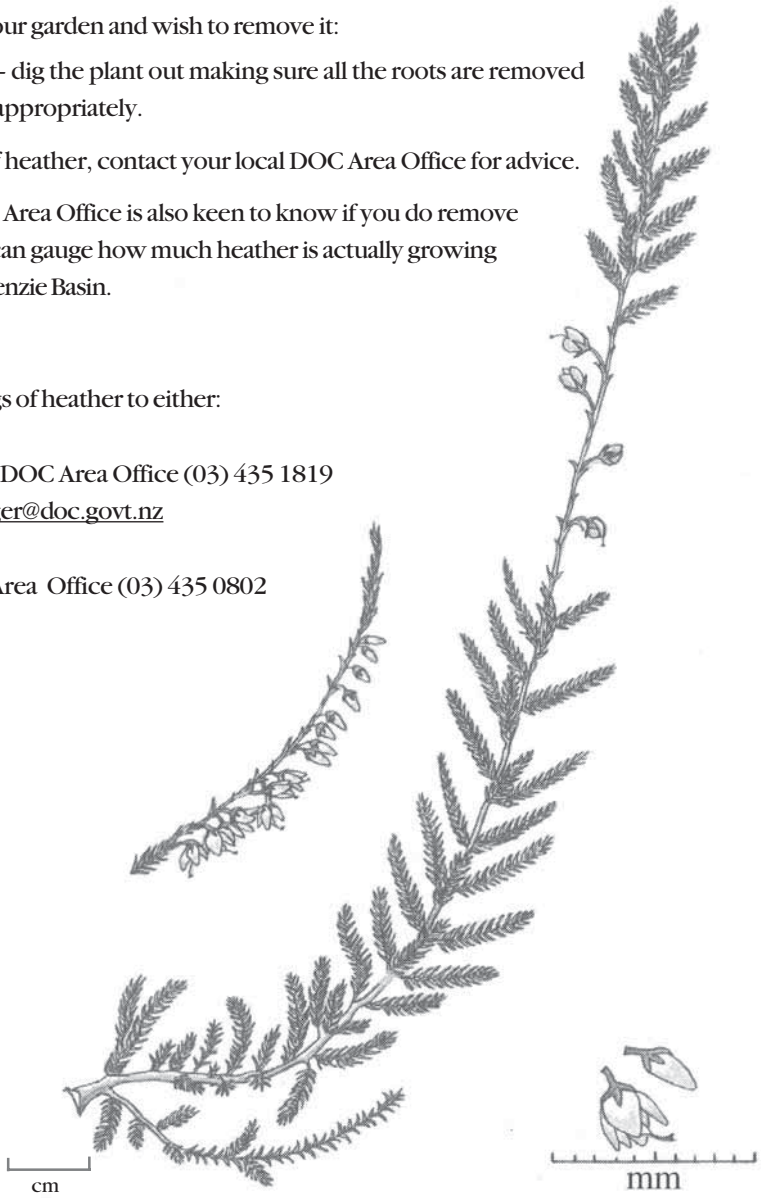
If you have heather in your garden and wish to remove it:

- For small plants – dig the plant out making sure all the roots are removed and disposed of appropriately.
- For large areas of heather, contact your local DOC Area Office for advice.
- The Aoraki DOC Area Office is also keen to know if you do remove heather so they can gauge how much heather is actually growing within the MacKenzie Basin.

Contact details

Please report all sightings of heather to either:

- Aoraki/Mt Cook DOC Area Office (03) 435 1819
  or email rbellringer@doc.govt.nz
- or Twizel DOC Area Office (03) 435 0802



Calluna vulgaris

Illustration from *Wild Plants of Mount Cook National Park* by Hugh D. Wilson