

What You Can Do

Black swallowwort vines are easily cut or torn down. However, much like many strong perennials, just removing the stems above ground doesn't touch the below-ground rhizomes, which vigorously re-sprout. Depending on what you encounter, there are a few options:

- Dig up the vines, taking care to get the roots. This is best done when the seed pods are mature but not splitting open yet – rob the plant of all the energy it put into the pods! Leave the plants to dry and die on hot pavement, burn them safely, or thoroughly wrap them in black plastic bags and discard. The last option is least desirable.
- It's a safe bet that new sprouts will form from roots that weren't caught. Three (or more!) successive cuttings/digs may be needed to starve the plants of the energy stored in the roots.
- Heavy mulching will impede new plants' growth, and can prevent the seeds from taking root.
- Frequent mowing will prevent seed pod formation, but will not stop regrowth from the roots.
- Do NOT attempt to compost cut swallowwort. You could end up with a lovely stand of vines growing out of your compost pile!

The most effective way of dealing with large stands of mature plants is to apply herbicide on the leaves and stems. Common brands of herbicide containing triclopyr are effective; however, herbicide use is beyond the scope of this brochure since it requires expertise, training, and in some cases a legal license. Again, cutting will have a noticeable effect, so go ahead and cut and pull, but don't expect that to solve the problem on its own.

The Invasive Species Committee may be able to provide some guidance, possibly help, and would like to know about large infestations in town. To contact the committee, send email to:

invasive@townofgroton.org

*Copyright 2019, Town of Groton Massachusetts Invasive Species Committee
All content may be freely copied, with attribution appreciated.*

INVASION ALERT!

Black swallowwort



Black swallowwort showing vines, spent blooms, and seed pods, and a closeup of an individual blossom.

Groton has been invaded by a foreign plant: Black swallowwort (*Cynanchum louiseae*). This fast growing perennial vine quickly colonizes fields, fencelines, and disturbed areas. It forms dense mats that can smother native growth. It spreads rapidly via airborne seeds and is a major hazard for wildlife including Monarch butterflies.

The purpose of this flyer is to show you what it is, how to identify it, and what you can do about it.

Description

Black swallowwort, or “black dog-strangling vine”, is a member of the milkweed family native to Europe. This invasive somewhat resembles our common milkweed, especially its seed pods. But unlike native milkweed, this is no friend of Monarch butterflies!



This invasive plant grows from strong underground *rhizomes*, or roots. Its strong vining habit and ability to grow in almost any condition except full shade make it a tough competitor that can crowd out many native plants.

Black swallowwort is highly effective at spreading via fluffy seeds that are exposed when mature seedpods split. These seeds are spread by wind and animals. Thus, Black swallowwort is an able colonizer of disturbed areas such as cut fields, along fences, roads and trail sides.



The ability to spread rapidly by roots or by copious seeds, and its vigorous growth habit, has allowed Black swallowwort to spread throughout New England, the Midwest, and much of Canada. But that’s perhaps not the worst part of this plant’s natural history...

Since Black swallowwort is in the milkweed family (*Asclepiadaceae*), it is attractive to Monarch butterflies, which are milkweed specialists. Monarch eggs and caterpillars are killed by this host, unlike our native milkweeds. Black swallowwort is actively harming a species already in trouble.



Monarch on native milkweed (*Asclepias*)

Identification



Black swallowwort leaves, stems, and closeup of flowers



Common milkweed

Unlike our native milkweeds which grow tall and upright, Black swallowwort is a mat-forming or climbing vine. The leaves are 2-4” long, smooth, opposite on the stem, and pointed.

Flowers appear in early to mid-summer. They are small, about ¼” each, and dark purple to black color with fine white hairs. The smell resembles rotting fruit.



Fresh Black swallowwort seed pods

After the flowers drop, long green seed pods appear. These are more slender and smoother than native milkweed pods, green, with purple stem attachments. The seed pods will plump up, dry out, and then split to release the brown seeds with fluffy white hairs.

Black swallowwort outcompetes many native plants, by forming both dense mats and climbing trees and posts. Not only is this plant harmful to native plants and Monarch butterflies, it can be poisonous if eaten by wild herbivores or livestock. Simply put, this is one nasty plant.



Mat-forming and tree-climbing