

Houndstongue

Cynoglossum officinale L.

Boraginaceae (Borage family)

Origin: Western Asia/ Eastern Europe

Location: gardens, roadsides, waste areas, rangeland, pastures, cropland, and public lands

Occurrence: Houndstongue seeds germinate from early to late spring. In the first year of growth seedlings form a rosette. The rosette dies back with hard winter frost, but new leaves are regenerated the following spring from the root. A flowering stalk is then produced and flowers appear from early to mid-summer. Flowers are succeeded by seeds encased in burs. The plant dies and turns brown after producing seed.

Description: An upright biennial. Flower stalks grow between 8 inches and 4 feet tall, with leaves arranged alternately up the stem. Leaves are rough and hairy, and lower leaves are borne on short stalks and grow up to 12 inches long and 3 inches wide. Upper leaves are smaller, narrower, and stalkless. The entire plant is covered with short soft hairs. Flowers are dark red and bell-shaped, with five petals. Borne on 3/16- 3/8 inch-long stalks, flowers grow along the ends of nodding stems that branch off from the upper leaf axils on the primary stalk and elongate as flowers are produced. Flowers measure approximately 3/8 inch across and are subtended by five sepals. Each flower produces



Rosette



Flowers



Desiccated plant



Burs with short barbs

four flattened, tear drop-shaped burs, arranged in a pyramidal pattern. Burs are single-seeded, 1/4 inch long and have a hard casing covered with short barbs.

Weedy Characteristics: Houndstongue reproduces by seed, and can produce 50-2,000 seeds per plant. Some burs drop to the ground, but most burs remain on the parent plant until passing animals or humans brush against them. The tiny bristles enable the burs to cling easily to fur, feathers or clothing, allowing for wide dispersal. Those seeds that persist on the plant can remain viable for up to 3 years. Houndstongue leaf residues secrete chemicals that inhibit the germination of some other plant seeds. Partly due to this fact, the plant can quickly colonize areas with partially bare, disturbed soil, prevent the establishment of desirable plants, and form dense stands. Other factors that contribute to its competitiveness are its shade tolerance and a large, woody taproot that allows houndstongue to survive harsh conditions, including drought.

Control: Young houndstongue does not thrive among more aggressive plants, or in an undisturbed setting. Therefore, maintaining a healthy, competitive garden, with little to no bare soil, is very effective. It is important to take action before flowering and seed production occur. Digging or hand-pulling the entire plant is preferable, but removing plant tops by cutting at least 1/2 inch below the soil surface can also be productive. If flowers or burs are present, the plant should be thrown out after removal. Tilling can bring good results, as well. Rosettes will often survive mowing, but plants with a flowering stalk will be weakened or destroyed by mowing. For current chemical or biological methods, consult your local state or county weed specialist.

General Facts: Although it is toxic to humans, historically, houndstongue roots and leaves have been used medicinally to treat a wide variety of physical ailments, including insomnia, coughs, diarrhea, and ulcers. Most animals find the green plant to have a disagreeable odor, and avoid it, and houndstongue plant parts have been used to deter rodents and other pests in gardens and food storage. However, when grazing animals have limited choices, they will ingest houndstongue, which contains alkaloids that can cause liver damage and sometimes death, even when dry. Furthermore, when caught in sheep's wool, the houndstongue burs reduce market value of the animals. The plant is a noxious weed in 6 U.S. states and in Alberta and British Columbia, Canada, and is considered invasive in several other U.S. states.

Other Common Names: beggar's lice, dog bur, dog's tongue, gypsy-flower, rats-and-mice, sheep's lice