

Pasture Weed Fact Sheet

Tall Ironweed

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Tall Ironweed *Vernonia gigantea* (Walt.) Trel.

Classification and Description

Tall ironweed is an erect, warm-season perennial plant that is a member of the sunflower family (Asteraceae). It is native to North America and can be found throughout Tennessee in hay fields, pastures and roadsides, particularly in moist areas. Plants emerge in the spring from seed or from rhizomes. Seedling leaves are oblong and the first leaves are oblanceolate to obovate. Mature plants can reach heights of up to 10 feet with branched stems at the top and older stems dark red in color (Fig. 1). Leaves are alternate with finely serrated margins, 0.5 to 1.5 inches wide, 2.25 to 12 inches long, and are tapered at both ends. In addition, the underside of leaves are hairy and have a prominent white midrib (Fig. 2). Tall ironweed flower heads are spreading on the terminal end branches and have 13 to 30 reddish to purple florets (Fig. 3). The cylindrical fruits are small, 3 to 4 mm long, with longitudinal grooves, and can vary from light tan to purplish brown in color. A mature plant has a fibrous taproot and rhizomes and is difficult to uproot.



Fig. 1. Upright growth habit and branching upper stems of tall ironweed.

Problems in Pastures and Hay Fields

Because tall ironweed is not very palatable, cattle and most other livestock selectively avoid it and instead graze on desirable forages in the pasture. Just as is the case with other troublesome weeds, this reduces grazing efficiency — cattle spend too much time looking for grass rather than eating it. If not managed, tall ironweed density can increase over time and compete with desirable forages.



Fig. 2. Underside of tall ironweed leaf showing prominent white midrib.



Fig. 3. Reddish to purple florets of tall ironweed flower heads.

Management in Pastures and Hay Fields

Prevention is a crucial component in the management of pasture and hay field weeds. Tall ironweed may sometimes start out in neglected areas of a field, such as depressions or drainage ditches, and often goes overlooked until it has spread throughout the field. Scouting fields every year to look for trouble spots can prevent tall ironweed from becoming a large-scale problem. Clipping will prevent seed formation and remove top growth, thereby allowing grass species to grow more vigorously. However, clipping alone will not reduce plant populations and can sometimes lead to multiple stems on plants during regrowth.

Herbicides are usually needed as part of a control program for tall ironweed. Even small-scale infestations are tough to manage, because plants are difficult to uproot by hand, hence the name “ironweed.” If the tall ironweed area is small or plants are lightly scattered in the field, then spot-spray applications are recommended. PastureGard HL can be applied as a foliar spray in summer, when plants are actively growing. Broadcast applications are required for large-scale infestations of tall ironweed. University of Tennessee research indicates that products containing aminopyralid (GrazonNext HL) provide long-term control of tall ironweed. As is the case with many perennial broadleaf weeds, mid- to late-summer herbicide applications are more effective in providing lasting control than applications made when plants have just emerged. Mowing during the spring to summer weakens tall ironweed, in that it forces the plant to use stored root reserves for regrowth. After mowing, allow plants to regrow to 10 to 20 inches in height before spraying. Following herbicide application, do not mow treated plants until the stems have completely dried down.

As is the case with all pesticide applications, be sure to thoroughly read and follow the label directions. For application rates and instructions, precautions, and other useful information, consult UT Extension Publication 1801, Weed Management in Pastures and Hay Crops (<https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1801.pdf>). For information regarding herbicide stewardship and reducing off-target damage to crops, please visit the stewardship website at <http://herbicidestewardship.utk.edu>.

References

- Bryson, C. T. and M. S. DeFelice, eds. 2009. p. 295 *in* Weeds of the South, Univ. of Georgia Press, Athens, GA 30602. 468 pp.
- Green, J. D. 2002. Tall ironweed control in grazed pastures. Univ. of KY. http://www2.ca.uky.edu/grazer/july12_tall_ironweed.php

Disclaimer

This publication contains pesticide recommendations that are subject to change at any time. The recommendations in this publication are provided only as a guide. It is always the pesticide applicator's responsibility, by law, to read and follow all current label directions for the specific pesticide being used. The label always takes precedence over the recommendations found in this publication.

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