

Invasive Plant Information Note

What is it?

Giant rhubarb (*Gunnera tinctoria*) is a large perennial plant which is native to Chile and Argentina in South America. It was first introduced to Ireland in the 1800s as an ornamental garden plant because of its size and exotic appearance. Since then, it has escaped into the wild and is now particularly invasive along the western coast. Giant rhubarb has naturalised along the milder and wetter western seaboard because the climatic conditions are similar to that of its former range. Giant rhubarb grows well in constantly damp soil and is frequently found on disused agricultural land, damp fields, roadsides and hillsides. Please see link to its distribution across Ireland: <http://maps.biodiversityireland.ie/#/Home>.



Fig. 1: Giant rhubarb (www.nonnativespecies.org)



Fig. 2: Invading agricultural land in Co. Mayo (www.dnfc.net)

Why should we be worried about it?

Giant rhubarb threatens indigenous biodiversity. Once established, it can quickly develop large and dense colonies which prevent native plants from growing underneath them (See Fig. 1 & Fig. 7). The plant is shade tolerant so it may colonise in a variety of landscapes. The dense stands of Giant rhubarb can render large areas of land unsuitable for agricultural or amenity purposes (See Fig. 2). The species can invade native grassland and subsequently reduce the value of the land for grazing. The huge leaves are unpalatable to livestock because of the small spikes on the back of the leaves and along the stems. When Giant rhubarb dies-back during the winter the soil is left bare and more susceptible to erosion. The large brown rhizomes become exposed and look unsightly and this is compounded when they trap litter (See Fig. 4). Decaying leaves can cause an unpleasant smell and block drains. Although Giant rhubarb is not poisonous to humans, the leaf blade and stem bear stiff bristles which can scratch skin.



Fig. 3: Giant rhubarb orange seeds (www.angiobergianska.se)



Fig. 4: Winter decay (www.ahwildlifelog.blogspot.ie)

How do we recognise Giant rhubarb?

Giant rhubarb resembles very large common garden rhubarb. Growth begins in early spring (March). Giant rhubarb can grow up to 2 metres in height. The stems are thick and covered in hooked bristles (See Fig. 5). Giant rhubarb has massive leathery umbrella-shaped and toothed leaves (See Fig. 1 & Fig. 7). Leaves can grow up to 1 metre long and 2 metres wide. Each plant produces 5-7 flower spikes between June and August. These have a large cone-like structure and grow from the base of the leaves (See Fig. 6). Each flower spike can reach 1 metre in height and produces an abundant supply of tiny red or orange seeds (See Fig. 3). The leaves begin to wither and decay in October (See Fig. 4).



Fig. 5: Prickly stem
(www.plantsystematics.org)



Fig. 6: Giant rhubarb flower spike
(www.myabccoolpix.com)



Fig. 7: Giant rhubarb foliage
(www.gardeningattheedge.wordpress.com)

How does Giant rhubarb spread?

It can reproduce by both sexual (seed) and asexual (vegetative) means. Each mature plant is capable of producing up to 250,000 drupe-like seeds every year which are then distributed by birds, water and human activity such as the transport and movement of soil containing the seeds. Giant rhubarb can also regenerate from root fragments, leaf cuttings and rhizomes. Once a small fragment of rhizome becomes established, it can extend by 15cm a year. Please note that breaking the rhizome may result in the creation of more plants.

How to manage Giant rhubarb

Giant rhubarb is an invasive species which may take a number of years to eradicate from a site. Integrated management using a combination of physical and chemical control measures is generally considered the most effective. As the plant is capable of regeneration from small pieces of rhizome, all material must be handled and disposed of in a way which does not result in the potential for further spread. Small fragments of plant material may be spread unintentionally on shoes and clothes. Please note that control will require continued input and follow-up over a number of years to deal with re-growth and subsequent seedling germination.

It is recommended that any attempt to control Giant rhubarb should be carried out by trained and experienced personnel.

For Further Information please visit:

- Invasive Species Ireland <http://invasivespeciesireland.com/>
- European Commission http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/invasivealien/index_en.htm