

Mulling Over Another Invasive Mulberry

By JIL SWEARINGEN

Imagine a White Mulberry (*Morus alba*) tree shrunk to the size of a Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) and bearing dry, inedible fruits. That's roughly what the pint-sized invader Mulberryweed, a.k.a. Hairy Crabweed (*Fatoua villosa*), looks like. Mulberryweed is a warm-season annual forb in the Mulberry family (Moraceae). Other members of this family in Maryland include Osage Orange (*Maclura pomifera*) which is native to Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas; non-native and invasive Paper Mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) and White Mulberry trees. Red Mulberry (*Morus rubra*) is the only native mulberry tree in Maryland where it is widespread but rare.

Why is Mulberry-weed (MW) a problem and how does it spread?

MW grows densely and displaces native plants. Local spread is through explosive release of seed—up to 4 feet! Distant spread is by seed in mulch, topsoil, yard waste, or in the soil of potted, balled, or transplanted plants; wildlife are not known to disperse it. It flowers numerous times in a year and produces prolific amounts of seed, facilitating its spread. MW has been in Maryland for over a decade and is spreading where it has been found. For these reasons, it's very helpful to learn how to recognize this plant, report it (see below), and remove it whenever possible.

Where did it come from and how did it get here?

MW is native to Australia, eastern Asia, and the Pacific Islands and was first documented in Louisiana around 1964. Initially, seeds may have come to the U.S. on repatriated military equipment after World War II and spread by hitch-hiking on landscaping products and soil. It readily escaped into natural areas by seed and by dumping of fertile plants. MW often shows up in arboreta and nurseries, possibly as a contaminant in potted plants, compost, and landscape materials.



Foliage resembles a White Mulberry seedling.



Plant habit.



Inflorescence with seed.



Seedling with flowers.

All images are of Mulberryweed and were taken by Joe Neal, Professor of Weed Science and Extension Specialist, Horticultural Science, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC.

Where is it found and what habitats

does it prefer? MW has been reported to be invasive in widely scattered locations from Minnesota to Texas, east to New York and Florida. In Maryland, it occurs in 13 Piedmont and Coastal Plain counties but has not yet been found in the western counties. MW prefers moist soil in part shade and is often found hiding under taller plants.

How will I know MW when I see it? It is an erect herbaceous summer annual, 2-4 ft. tall, and covered with velvety hairs (thus the specific epithet "*villosa*"). Like most members of Moraceae, the stems exude a milky sap when cut. Other identifying features include:

- **Leaves:** Alternate, stalked, 2-4 in. long by 1-2 in. wide, triangular to heart-shaped, with toothed margins and a tapering tip.
- **Flowers:** Tiny (less than 1/10 in.), cream-colored, and arranged in dense, stalked, feathery, rounded clusters up to 3/4 in. across that emerge from the leaf axils. Clusters are purplish when young, turning brown with age.

- **Fruits:** Dry (no pies from this one!), single-seeded achenes less than 1/10" long. Seeds can survive for several years in the soil.

Does MW look like other plants? MW might be confused with non-native invasive Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) and Ground Ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*); native Pennsylvania Pellitory (*Parietaria pensylvanica*) and Clearweed (*Pilea pumila*), and other herbaceous plants with toothed heart-shaped leaves.

What do I do if I find MW? Report it using the iNaturalist and/or Early Detection and Distribution Mapping System (EDDMapS). Pull plants by hand and bag and dispose of material in the trash; do not put in compost or brush piles. A layer of mulch 2-3 in. deep effectively limits seedling emergence.

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