



Lancaster County Weed Control

www.lancaster.ne.gov/weeds
July 2011 Monthly Report

The following article was published in the Sunday, July 31st Lincoln JournalStar and written by Kathryn Cates Moore.



This park space area is NOT compliant with city ordinances.

Warning: Encroaching branches too close to the sidewalk could be hazardous to your hedge. Weeds over six inches tall are subject to involuntary mowing. And if your front yard landscape plants grow over 30 inches tall, you may be in violation of city ordinances.

Be on alert, homeowners. City ordinances govern "weeds and worthless vegetation" over six inches tall in your yard, or landscaping in the "park space" -- the area between the street curb and your sidewalk -- growing over 30 inches tall or encroaching on public areas. You can be cited by the city or county plant police.

Two agencies work on these issues, answering complaints that arrive by phone, mail and email. And with today's smartphones, photos often accompany many of those complaints.

The Lancaster County Weed Authority oversees violators of the Lincoln "weed abatement ordinance." It mandates property owners to cut or clear weeds more than 6 inches high. Brent Meyer,

weed control superintendent, said he and his staff do 4,500 to 6,000 site inspections a year based on complaints.

At the city's Public Works department, Greg Topil, an engineering specialist, keeps track of another city ordinance aimed at keeping the public park space unobstructed. His team tracks about 75 to 100 vegetation complaints a month, he said.

For decades the Lancaster County weed authority has overseen vacant lots and other overgrown areas on private property. In 2003, the City Council passed an ordinance to allow the right-of-way strips of city property to be planted with annuals, perennials and vegetables under the height allotment, and a separate department was created to monitor it. Budget cuts over the years eliminated that department, and eventually the job was assigned to Topil's crew.

Cara Bentz is very familiar with the ordinances. She's been cited in past years and is trying hard this year to keep up with the quick-growing vegetation in her "hell strip," which is what gardeners often call the piece of property between the street and sidewalk.

"With the amount of rain we've had this summer, it's a challenge," she said. "I sympathize with the city inspectors this year. Everything is much taller than usual."

As an active member of Lincoln's gardening community, Bentz knows the difference between a weed and an acceptable landscape plant. She's worked hard to find plants that work in an area that is hot, not irrigated and gets salt-treated snow melt spray in the winters. Asters, hibiscus, native grasses, coneflowers and daylilies make up the mix in her street-side garden.

But it was goldenrod that triggered a complaint from a former neighbor several years ago, she said. With his farm background, he felt like goldenrod and native grasses were weeds and not fit for city gardens, so he called authorities.

"We resolved it," she said. "But he was terribly irate."

Topil said safety is their main concern, wanting to avoid obstructions of street views or driveways.

"Appearances are in the eyes of the beholder," he said.

If the plants meet the criteria and are maintained, it really doesn't matter if neighbors don't like it, Topil said.

Front yard gardens are popular because they offer an alternative to grass (and mowing) and give homeowners the opportunity to have flowers in their yards. Since they became legal and are more and more common, complaints about them have increased, Topil said.

Those that end up being neighborly disagreements are costly to the city. Sending inspectors to the properties costs anywhere from \$25 to \$75 a visit, depending on the time spent inspecting the area.

Foreclosures and abandoned lots are the top-reported problems for Topil and Meyer this year. Abandoned properties are every neighbor's nightmare, and there often is no one to notify of the complaint.

When a homeowner doesn't respond to a complaint, or he or she does not comply with the request to take care of the problem in the allotted time, the city is authorized to have the area mowed and send the owner a bill for the work.

Usually, after the initial conversation, homeowners are cooperative about taking care of the problem, but there always are a few who aren't interested in complying, Topil said.

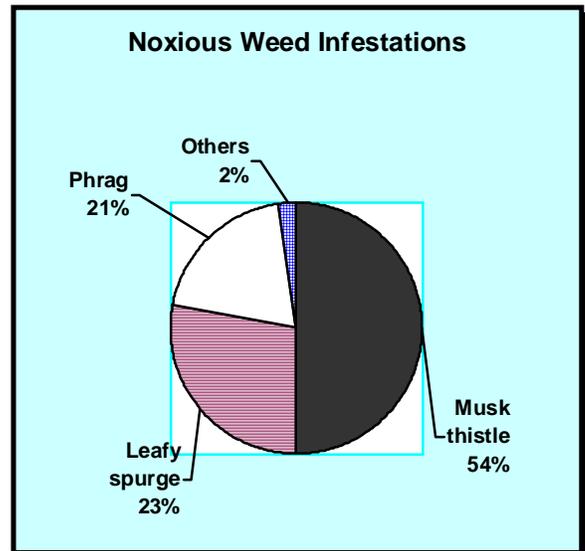
"When you plant sunflowers that grow to 6 feet and we ask you to take them down, then you plant them again the next year, it is pretty obvious," Topil said.

Noxious Weed Inspection Activity
2,210 inspections on 1,583 sites have been made this year on Noxious Weeds in Lancaster County.

Noxious Weeds inside City Limits

- Made 650 inspections on 405 sites on 3,711 acres.
- Found 319 violations on 493 acres.
 - 204 Musk thistle
 - 38 Leafy spurge
 - 43 Phragmites
 - 18 Knotweed
 - 8 Purple loosestrife
 - 4 Canada thistle
 - 2 Saltcedar
 - 2 Plumeless thistle
- Found no violations on 86 sites.
- Sent 56 notices, 204 letters, 49 trace cards and made 33 personal contacts.
- 84 control plans have been received.
- 154 sites controlled by landowners.
- 7 sites controlled by our contractors
- Control is pending on 158 sites.

Noxious Weeds outside City Limits



- Made 1,560 inspections on 1,178 sites on 13,650 acres.
- Found 987 violations on 1,979 acres.
- Found no violations on 155 sites.
- 29 complaints received.
- Sent 131 notices, 540 letters, 80 trace cards, and made 18 personal contacts.
- 9 sites have been controlled by our contractors.

August Planned Activities

- 11 Management Team Meeting
- 12 Nebraska Invasive Species Meeting
- 16 Lower Platte WMA Meeting
- 18 Management Team Retreat
- 25 County Board Meeting
- 31 Inventory due