Castor oil plant

Ricinus communis

Castor oil plant spreads over sandy soil areas, creek banks and gullies. This can lead to a significant loss of prime grazing land.

The seeds of castor oil contain ricin, a poison that is extremely toxic to livestock and humans. Leaves have a lesser amount of toxin. Symptoms of poisoning in animals usually do not appear for a few hours or several days.

Seeds cause gastrointestinal disorders and leaves tend to cause neuromuscular disorders. Poisoning in livestock is rarely reported though, as castor oil plant is seldom grazed by stock when other pasture plants are available. Also, small amounts of the plant will induce an immunity to poisoning.

Declaration details

Castor oil plant is not declared under the *Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route Management) Act 2002*; however, plants that are not declared under state legislation may have control requirements imposed by local governments.

Description and general information

Castor oil plant is a tall, branching perennial shrub that grows to 3 m high and occasionally higher. It has stout, hollow branches that are a dull pale green or red. Older branches and trunks turn greyish.

Large leaves (10–60 cm across) are widely spaced on the branches and grow on long, stout, hollow stalks attached off-centre to the bottom of the leaf. Each leaf is divided into 7–9 pointed triangular segments with toothed edges and conspicuous veins. Leaves are glossy, dark reddish-green when young and glossy green when mature.

The flowers are crowded in stout, erect spikes in the forks of the upper branches. Female flowers are in the upper part of the spikes and male flowers at the base.

Female flowers develop into fruit about 2.5 cm across that are covered with soft green or red spines. The fruit have three segments, each segment containing one large, mottled, smooth seed. When ripe, the fruit explode violently and throw the seeds a distance of several metres.

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The name castor oil plant is sometimes mis-applied to bellyache bush (*Jatropha gossypifolia*). Bellyache bush can be found in similar habitats but is usually smaller than castor oil plant; has leaves with only three smooth, rounded lobes; and has small, smooth fruits found in clusters in the upper parts of the plant.

Habitat and distribution

Castor oil plant is native to Africa and Asia, and is now naturalised throughout Australia. It is often abundant along watercourses and floodplains, disturbed or waste land, and roadsides. It may be common locally after heavy rains or floods.

Control

Individual plants or small infestations may be removed by cultivation or hand-pulling. Broadscale infestations may require spraying with herbicides to control the plant.

Herbicides registered for the control of castor oil plant are provided in Table 1.

Further information

Further information is available from your local government office, or by contacting Biosecurity Queensland (call 13 25 23 or visit our website at www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au).

Table 1. Herbicides registered for the control of castor oil plant

Situation	Herbicide	Rate	Comments
Foliar (overall spray)	2,4-D amine	4.2 L/ha	Add wetting agent Spray plant to point of run-off
Basal spray/cut stump	Garlon 600/Triclopyr	1.7 L per 100 L diesel	Basal spray around entire base of plant to a height of 40 cm when plant is actively growing Cut stump at any time of year, but treat stump immediately after cutting

Read the label carefully before use. Always use the herbicide in accordance with the directions on the label.

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