

Battling CHEATGRASS never ends

Story and photo by Katy Yoder

Our son-in-law, Toby Maxwell, is a research scientist working on a project in Idaho. He's studying invasive species like cheatgrass, and how climate change correlates with its proliferation. Since I spent many back-aching hours last year hand-weeding cheatgrass in our pasture, I'm well aware of its detrimental effect on the High Desert.

Cheatgrass begins as a benign-looking treat for grazers. Although it fills stomachs, it's poorly nutritious for the animals consuming it. When it turns from green to a luscious purple and begins to dry out, it loses its allure as a food source and becomes a menace. The foxtails waving in the wind and attaching themselves to the coats of animals are an effective way to scatter seeds and expand territory. Horses and other grazers that snatch a bite of grass and get some foxtails along with it, can get infections and even die from sharp foxtails burrowing deep into tender tissue.

At its climax, cheatgrass can decimate an ecosystem, growing in near monoculture — the dominance by a single plant in a given area. This can result in pathogens and disease which undermines the potential of a plot of land, depletes soil resources, and diminishes the



Beau roams a pasture that's got some cheatgrass in it. The invasive pest can't be eliminated entirely — but it can be fought.

quality of the food produced there.

I've asked Toby how to get rid of cheatgrass. It's not native to Central Oregon and was accidentally introduced to the U.S. in packing material in the late 1800s. It's a winter annual grass native to Europe, southwestern Asia, and northern Africa. It is now invasive worldwide. It's common for seeds, designed to burrow into the ground, to get into a dog's skin, ears and nose which can cause infections and even death.

According to the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service, *Bromus tectorum*, or cheatgrass, spreads explosively in the ready-made seedbeds prepared

by the trampling hooves of livestock on over-grazed rangelands. Disturbance associated with homesteading and cultivation of winter wheat also accelerated its spread and establishment.

By the 1930s, cheatgrass was becoming the dominant grass over vast areas of the Pacific Northwest and the Intermountain West regions. It's now estimated to infest more than 41 million hectares (101 million acres) in western states. While it's pesky for our pets, it's also known to increase the frequency of wildfire and disrupt habitat for a variety of native animals of interest to naturalists and hunters alike.

Learn more here: https://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_brte.pdf.

Toby was clear that there's no way to completely get rid of cheatgrass. It will always find a way to survive somehow, somewhere.

His work is in its early stages. What he knows so far is that one way to gain some control of cheatgrass in our Central Oregon pastures is by making sure beneficial grasses are healthy and receive proper nourishment. Cheatgrass is an opportunist. It lives and flourishes when other grasses are weakened by poor soil quality, lack of water and detrimental uses like overgrazing.

I'm still going to pull up the cheatgrass. But I'm not putting down poison in its place. That will only kill living things needed for a healthy, diverse, multicultural ecology. I look at fields, mottled with snow and wet soil, and know there are foxtail seeds that I missed. They live under the snow all winter, giving their destructive agenda a competitive edge after winter's siege. They will be the first to push through the cold ground and rise towards the sunlight. Finding and eradicating them when they're young and harmless will allow native plants a chance to thrive.

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