

# Butterfly Bush

*Buddleja davidii* Buddleja Family

## Identification Tips

- Deciduous shrub up to 15 feet tall with arching branches
- Showy flower spikes at branch ends, often nodding, 4-30 inches long
- Flowers typically light purple with orange centers, but a range of cultivars come in a variety of colors, including magenta, blue, white, and dark purple
- Leaves 4-10 inches long, 1-3 inches wide, dark green on top and whitish underneath, with toothed edges
- Leaves grow in opposite pairs
- Young stems green; older stems have peeling, gray-brown bark

## Biology

Flowers early June to mid-October. Reproduces mainly by lightweight winged seeds, but can also develop roots on branches that have been buried or broken off. Quick to mature, often producing seeds during its first year of growth. A single flower spike can produce 40,000 seeds. Seeds remain viable in soil for 3-5 years.

## Impacts

Spreads over large distances due to lightweight seeds that move easily by wind and water to new areas. Invades riverbanks, forming dense thickets and crowding out native vegetation such as willows. Also impedes forest regeneration. Once established, tough to eliminate.

## Distribution

Found in disturbed areas such as riverbanks, roadsides, fields, and recently logged or burned forests, as well as flower gardens and yards. Flourishes in well-drained soil and full sun, but can also grow in challenging conditions such as pavement cracks, under bridges, along railroad tracks, and on dry river cobble.

## What You Can Do

While there is no legal requirement to control butterfly bush in King County, the Noxious Weed Control Board recognizes this plant as invasive. It recommends prevention of spread into uninfested areas and control in natural areas, where feasible.

## Control Methods

### Prevention:

Once established, this plant can be difficult to eradicate from an area. Consider alternative plants for your landscape. There are many showy, butterfly-attracting plants that are non-invasive and well suited to the Pacific Northwest (see box below). If you have butterfly bush on your property, prevent it from spreading elsewhere. Remove spent flower

**Non-Regulated Class B  
Noxious Weed: Control  
Recommended**



*Despite its friendly sounding name and pretty flowers, this plant doesn't provide suitable food or habitat for native butterfly larvae.*



*Plants have 4-10 inch long, dark green, toothed, opposite leaves.*



*Showy purple flower spikes appear at branch ends.*

## Questions?

King County Noxious Weed Control Program: **206-477-WEED** [kingcounty.gov/weeds](http://kingcounty.gov/weeds)

heads in the fall before they disperse seeds (don't wait until spring), and discard in the trash to avoid spreading seeds. Composting seedheads is not recommended.

**Manual:**

Seedlings can be hand-pulled with little effort; larger bushes will take more time and labor. Branches should not be left on the bare ground, as they can form roots and regrow. Never discard any part of this plant in natural areas or on roadsides. Branches can be burned (if your area allows burning), put in your yard waste container, or taken to a landfill or composting facility. However, seedheads should always be placed in the trash.

**Cultural/Grazing:**

Although goats will eat butterfly bush and can damage it, they will not kill or eradicate this plant. If feasible for the location, consider using goat grazing as part of an integrated program with other methods, perhaps followed up with manual or chemical treatment.

**Chemical:**

**Follow all applicable laws and regulations regarding herbicide use on your site, and only use products appropriate and legal for the location.** Controlling butterfly bush by spraying with a brush-control herbicide is somewhat effective. For better results, cut off the trunk at the base and immediately apply concentrated glyphosate or triclopyr to the freshly cut surface. Always follow the label directions on any herbicide product you use to minimize any potential risks to you and the environment. For more information, contact the Noxious Weed Control Program.



*This popular garden plant has started to move into natural areas, creating problems.*



*One flower spike can produce 40,000 seeds!*

## A better alternative:

**California lilac is a profusely blooming evergreen shrub that makes a nice alternative to butterfly bush.**

California lilac is fast-growing, drought-tolerant, and has fragrant blue flowers that attract butterflies and honey bees. It also tolerates poor soils. Other alternatives include **chaste tree** for hot, sunny sites and **Pacific ninebark**, a native shrub good for sunny or shady areas. Additionally, **Chilean potato vine**, **red-flowering currant**, **orange-ball butterfly bush**, and **fallowiana butterfly bush** make wonderful flowering additions to the garden. Best of all, they won't escape to cause problems down the road!



*California lilac (Ceanothus spp.)*



*Chaste tree (Vitex agnus-castus)*



*Pacific ninebark (Physocarpus capitatus)*