Reed canarygrass

Western Invasive Plant Fact Sheet #6

Phalaris arundinacea

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Scan or Click for more management information

Quick Facts: Reed canarygrass *(Phalaris arundinacea)* is a tall, sod-forming perennial grass that commonly occurs in wetlands, riparian areas, and other moist habitats. It establishes readily in disturbed sites such as ditches, floodplains, and roadsides. Reed canarygrass can form dense, persistent stands that are difficult to control. These stands can interfere with infrastructure, contaminate pastures with unpalatable forage, and harm restoration efforts by outcompeting native vegetation. Although reed canarygrass is considered native to parts of North America, many widespread and aggressive populations are associated with introduced or hybridized strains, and management is typically based on site impacts rather than origin.

Invasion Strategy: Reed canarygrass spreads through both seed and vegetative reproduction. Each inflorescence can produce hundreds of seeds. However, these seeds are slow to germinate, shade-intolerant, and remain viable in the soil for less than four years. Rhizomatous growth is the primary means of expansion for reed canarygrass, and root growth can exceed 10 feet per year. Fragments of rhizomes or stems can also sprout new plants and may spread to new areas if carried through water or on equipment, animal fur, or clothing.

Identifying Features:

- Stems may grow up to 9 ft. tall
- Inflorescences are panicles, but may be compact and resemble spikes. These are green or purple-tinged early in the season, and they later turn straw-colored and remain on plants through winter (Fig. 3).
- Leaf blades are flat, hairless, and up to 0.75 inches wide (Fig. 4), and 1.5 ft. long
- A thin, papery membrane (also known as a ligule) that resembles a fingernail is found where the leaf blade meets the stem (Fig. 4)

Reed canarygrass *Phalaris arundinacea*

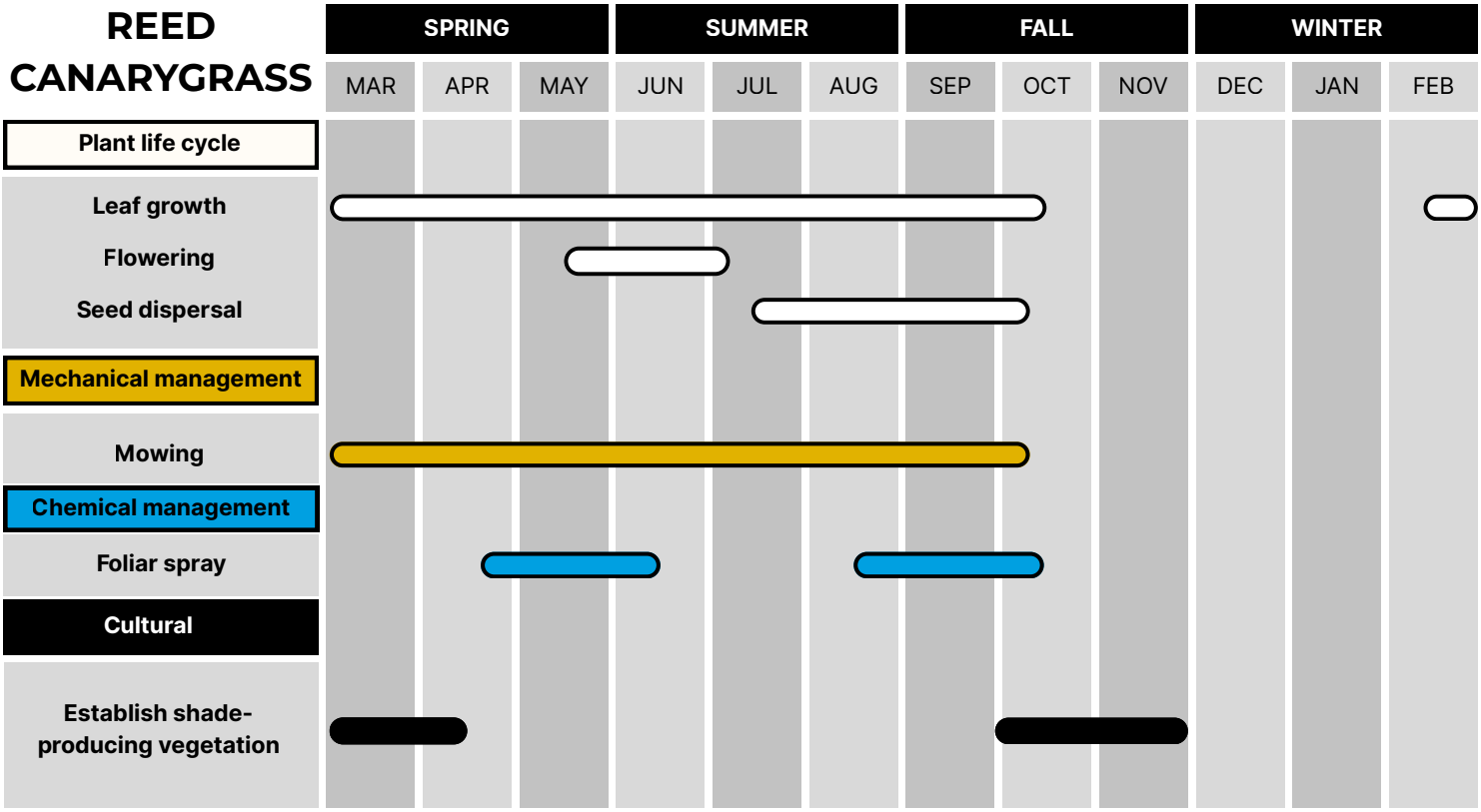
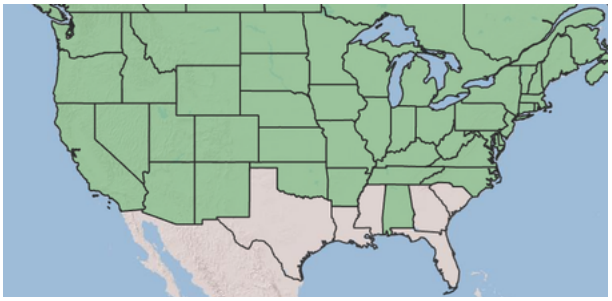


Table 1. This chart is based on USDA plant hardiness zone 7. Plant growth and treatment times vary by region.

Management Methods:
Mechanical - Consistent mowing for several years can be effective to control reed canarygrass. Digging and cultivation are typically not recommended because of reproduction from rhizome fragments.
Chemical - Herbicides can be applied as foliar sprays. Applications are most effective when done in late spring and late fall, and repeated over multiple growing seasons.
Cultural - Reed canarygrass is shade intolerant. Introducing shade sources, such as woody vegetation, is a long-term strategy that can reduce growth and germination.
Disclaimer - Selecting the best management method for this plant can be site- and context-specific. Check with your local USDA Service Center or University Extension agent to explore your options and determine what is most appropriate for your location and situation.

Management Information: Dispose of cut plant materials where they cannot resprout. If seeds are present, bag them and dispose of them in a landfill. Equipment should be cleaned after management. Personal protective equipment is recommended when removing any invasive species, and especially when using herbicides. Always follow label instructions when using herbicide!



Native range Species present Absent

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
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Reed canarygrass *Phalaris arundinacea*

Look-alike species: Reed canarygrass resembles several other grasses, particularly Johnsongrass and Great Basin wildrye.

Johnsongrass (*Sorghum halepense*)
Like reed canarygrass, Johnsongrass is a tall perennial grass with broad leaf blades and rhizomes (Fig. 5). Also an invasive species, it can be toxic to livestock and is a host for crop pathogens. Distinguishing features include:

- Inflorescences that are more open, reddish-purple, and pyramid-shaped than reed canarygrass
- Leaf blades with a prominent white midvein

Figure 5

Great Basin wildrye (*Leymus cinereus*)
Great Basin wildrye is a large, native, cool-season grass that may appear similar to reed canarygrass due to its size and flat, broad leaves (Fig. 6). However, it is not an invasive species and can provide several beneficial services, including as forage for livestock. Distinguishing features include:

- Inflorescences are linear and compact (spikes)
- Generally found in dryer areas than reed canarygrass
- Bunchgrass without rhizomes

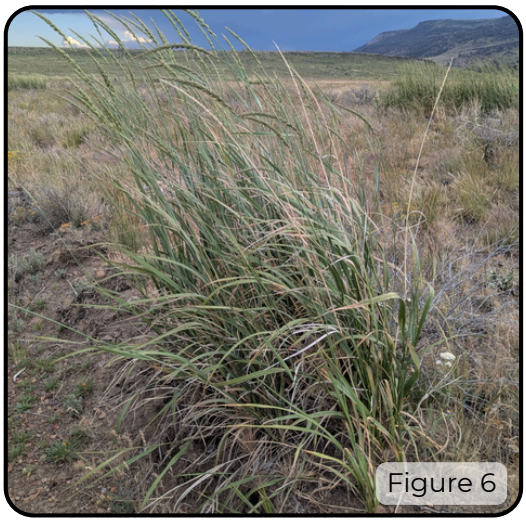
Figure 6

References and Additional Reading:

- Oregon Flora Project *Phalaris arundinacea* [Identification, geographic range]
- Pacific Northwest Pest Management Handbooks canarygrass [Chemical management]
- King County Noxious Wed Control Program Reed Canarygrass [Best management practices]
- Oregon State University - Solve pest problems. How to manage reed canary grass: will you live with it or control it? [Identification and management].
- USDA NRCS Plant Guide: reed canarygrass [History and management]

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- Range map: USDA PLANTS Database

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