

Rhododendron in the MacGillycuddy Reeks

On a Spring day out in Killarney National Park or the Gap of Dunloe, you won't have to look too hard to spot some Rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) with its striking display of pink flowers. This ornamental plant, once prized for its beautiful flowers and usefulness as a hedge for creating shelter, was planted around Muckross in the 19th Century. Since then it has spread to, or been planted in, many other locations and is a common sight in many areas. It is a species which originated from the Mediterranean and has done exceedingly well in our Irish climate, particularly here in Kerry. Rhododendron is an excellent example of a non-native invasive species, which free from the factors that limit it in its native lands, has thrived at the expense of our own native habitats and species. The old oak woodlands for which Killarney is renowned are under serious threat from the invasion of this species, as are many of the peatland habitats such as the heath and bogs. Rhododendron can form dense thickets, blocking light, shading out native vegetation and preventing regeneration.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) have been tackling the Rhododendron in Killarney National Park for many years. In parts of the MacGillycuddy Reeks, such as the Gap of Dunloe and the Black Valley, Rhododendron is also becoming well established. Local farmers regularly comment on the rate of spread over the last 10-15 years. Until recently, no action had been taken to address the spread of rhododendron in the MacGillycuddy Reeks, an area of both high scenic value and high nature conservation value.

Over the last 2 years, The MacGillycuddy Reeks European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Project, a locally led agri-environmental project, led by South Kerry Development Partnership, funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine as part of Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 which aims to improve the sustainability and economic viability of the farming in the MacGillycuddy Reeks, has been working with local landowners in the area to manage the Rhododendron and prevent the loss of protected heath and bog habitats and grazing lands to this species. Given the nature of

invasive species, and the speed at which they spread, early intervention leads to more efficient and successful treatment. For many landowners in the MacGillycuddy Reeks, the prospect of dealing with well-established populations on their own is an incredibly daunting task. Indeed, some have tried and failed over the years.

With the support of the MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP Project Team, a collective working group has been established to assist landowners in treating rhododendron on their land. The MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP Project has facilitated training on the correct use of pesticides and on best practice methods for treating Rhododendron for all farmers and members of the collective group carrying out this work. The recommended method of treatment is extremely targeted and applies a very small quantity of herbicide directly to a wound on the stem of the plant ensuring that there are no impacts to non-target species in the surrounding environment. The MacGillycuddy Reeks Project Team have been educating farmers and the general public about the issues associated with Rhododendron and have been encouraging landowners with very small Rhododendron populations to treat them before the problem grows. The project has also been working closely with the recently appointed Kerry Biosphere Officer to raise awareness of the issues amongst residents in the area, as garden plants can act as a seed source for the re-infestation of adjacent farmlands.

Control of rhododendron is not a one-time treatment but must be carried out in several phases over a number of years. In the first two years of the EIP Project, approximately 118ha of land containing rhododendron has had the first round of treatment and work is ongoing. For more information please contact the Project Team.