

Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*)

Description

Geranium robertianum is most commonly called “Herb Robert”, but is also known by many as “Stinky Bob” because of its strong herb-like fragrance. This small plant and invasive weed species has an incredible super power that helps it dominate wherever its seeds end up. It is native to Europe, parts of Asia, and Africa.

Identification

Leaves

- Deeply divided and sparsely covered with soft white hairs
- Light green, but occasionally in sunny conditions they're touched with red
- Foliage gives off a pungent odor when crushed; some people say it smells like burnt rubber

Flowers

- Flower have five petals
- The most common color is bright pink, but can range from almost white to magenta

Form

- In the shade, they can mature and flower at 2-3 inches
- Branches low to the ground, forming a rosette
- Can reach up to a foot tall

Additional details

- Roots are fibrous and easy to pull (thank goodness!)
- Stems are red and covered with white hairs
- Is sometimes mistaken for bleeding heart (*Dicentra Formosa*) when not in flower. Bleeding hearts does not have red stems, hairy leaves, or stems and the leaves are not as dark green.

Impact

Herb Robert invades forests, where it displaces native species and forms dense mats of monocultures. It is highly aggressive and spreads quickly by seed. It can invade forests that are in pristine condition and establish vigorous populations. It releases allelopathic chemicals, which prevents native understory plants from growing and providing diversity. It reduces animal habitat and food sources and attracts pollinators away from native species.



Habitat

Highly adaptable to different conditions, but especially likes shade to partial shade. Does not rely on soil disturbance to enter a site. Prefers moist sites but can tolerate seasonal dryness. It will grow under closed canopies or in open sites. Commonly found in gardens, having arrived in pots with native or ornamental plants. It likes river banks, deltas, gravel trails, and rocky slopes. Usually does not grow above 4,000 ft.



Reproduction & spread

Reproduces solely by seed. Plants can self-pollinate. Seeds eject over 20 feet and are spread by the plants sticky parts that attach to boots, clothing, and animals via sticky threads. Once released seeds can germinate immediately. They can flower early and seeds that over winter usually flower in late summer, giving Herb Robert an almost year around flowering season. Seeds are viable for up to 5 years.

Personal Experience

When we moved to our ½ acre garden, it was almost all invasive weeds: ivy, blackberry, Herb Robert, and many more. We had large patches of Herb Robert everywhere. I'm now 74 and have always been avid about hand weeding. Luckily, Herb Robert is very easy to pull. I finally figured out its life cycle as well as that of other weeds. Pull flowering weeds first. Then move on to the next bed and do the same.

I take daily walks in my garden. If the invasive weeds are blooming, I pull them. And remember: plants have cycles. When the beds are clear of flowering invasive weeds, I shift back to the berries and ivy. Even though we have Herb Robert in our area, we usually get only one or two starts per year.

I had a friend that was overrun with Herb Robert and could not get ahead of the new plants. I went over and we spent a few hours clearing them out before they bloomed and had a fun time in the process. Note: Herb Robert grows year-round. Our lovely native bleeding heart doesn't. So you are safe to pull out what you are worried might be a bleeding heart during the winter when they are so easy to pull in the damp soil.

How to help our forests

If you hike, take a cloth bag with you. Every time you see an Herb Robert plant, pull it up and put it in the garbage. If everyone who likes to walk in our forest pulled just a few, it could really help. Additionally, Portland Audubon always needs people to help remove Herb Robert and other invasive weed species from their trails. You will meet others gardeners that love native plants and make new friends. You might even have the opportunity to share native plants starts and seed!

Have fun saving our native habitat and Happy Gardening!