



NWT COUNCIL
ON INVASIVE SPECIES,
PESTS, AND PATHOGENS

White sweetclover.
Photo: Michael J. Oldham

White and Yellow Sweetclover

(*Melilotus albus* and *Melilotis officinalis*)

Yellow sweetclover.
Photo: Johanna Stewart

IMPACTS

Sweetclover can threaten biodiversity by invading natural habitats and out-competing native plants. As a nitrogen-fixer, it can change soil chemistry and alter wildlife habitat. It can grow tall along roadsides and may block traffic signs or reduce visibility. It may also increase wildlife grazing along roadsides, which can increase the risk of animal-vehicle collisions.

BIOLOGY

Sweetclover is a biennial plant, meaning it grows over two years before flowering and setting seed. As a member of the pea family, sweetclover is a nitrogen-fixer and can convert nitrogen from the air into nutrients in the soil.

INTRODUCTION

Native to Europe and Asia, it was introduced to North America as a forage crop and honey plant. It is sometimes used in roadside seed mixes or as a cover crop in farming. The seeds can be unintentionally spread by vehicles, moving water, or as a weed mixed in with crop seed.

PREVENTION

Prevent the spread of invasive plants by washing mud and seeds from vehicles or equipment that have been used in infested areas, paying special attention to tire tread and wheel wells.

MANAGEMENT

Sweetclover that has not yet flowered can be cut down to about 2.5 cm above the ground and left on site to dry out. Plants with flowers or seeds should be cut, bagged, and buried in a landfill. Cutting will likely have to be repeated over several years to prevent re-growth from seeds in the soil.

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IDENTIFICATION

Flowers: slender clusters of small, sweet-smelling white or yellow flowers. Blooms from June-September.

Stem: smooth, erect, and branched, growing up to 2 m tall.

Leaves: have 3 leaflets and are alternate along the stem. Leaf edges are toothed.

Seeds: small, yellow seeds develop in a ridged fruit. Often remain on the plant over winter. One plant can produce 300,000 seeds, which can remain viable in the soil for over 30 years.



White sweetclover flowers.
Photo: Michael J. Oldham



Sweetclover seeds in ridged fruit. One plant can produce 300,000 seeds. Photo: Stefan Gottermann

RANGE

Sweetclover can be found in every province and territory in Canada. It spreads along highways and rivers and is found around communities in the NWT.

HABITAT

It grows in open, disturbed areas, including roadways, fields, and riverbanks. Under optimal conditions, it can spread and invade natural habitats.

SIMILAR SPECIES

Seedlings can be confused with milk-vetch (*Astragalus* spp.), alfalfa (*Medicago* spp.), or clover (*Trifolium* spp.). The native milk-vetch has compound leaves with 8-11 pairs of leaflets. Alfalfa and clover are alien species. They have 3 leaflets and round flower clusters.



Loose-flowered milkvetch (*Astragalus tenellus*). Photo: Bruce Bennett



Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*). Photo: Johanna Stewart



Alsike clover (*Trifolium hybridum*). Photo: Johanna Stewart