

Lambkill

*Kalmia angustifolium*L.

Other name: Sheep Laurel

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Description

Lambkill is a short, erect woody shrub growing up to 1 m in height, although it rarely reaches this height in blueberries. It is a perennial that spreads rapidly by underground rhizomes. It has leaves that persist into the winter. These occur in whorls of 3 on the stem. The dark green leaves turn reddish-brown in the late fall. The leaves are simple and not divided into different segments. They are waxy on the upper surface. The leaf margins are entire, not having teeth or lobes. Each leaf is about 3-6 cm long and up to 2 cm wide. The bright pink saucer-shaped flowers grow in a cluster about 3/4 of the way up the stem. Each flower has 10 stamens fused to the petals. The seeds are produced in a capsule that is divided into 5 parts and is about 4 mm in diameter.

Lambkill



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Economic Importance

Lambkill contains a toxic compound which is especially poisonous to livestock. Cattle, goats, sheep and horses are often poisoned, but the plant is eaten only when other vegetation is lacking, such as in early spring and winter. If consumed in large enough quantities, it will cause nausea and vomiting in humans. This species prefers a dry acidic soil and is well adapted to growing in wild lowbush blueberries. Burning stimulates regrowth of the weed from rhizomes and, if not controlled, will eventually take over as the principal species. It is easily controlled within most lowbush blueberry fields, and rarely poses a serious problem. Control, however, maybe more difficult in sandy soils.

Lambkill Sketch



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Life Cycle

Lambkill is a perennial shrub that grows laterally from underground rhizomes. Once the plant is established, lateral growth of the rhizomes is quite variable but significant spread can occur in sandy or gravelly soils. Older plants can have a well-developed taproot that can penetrate deeply into the soil. This helps lambkill survive during periods of low moisture. New growth appears in late May to early June and flowers appear in late June to early July. The seed-containing capsules are formed by mid-September with the seeds being released by early October. Fields developed from woodland are known to have more problems with lambkill than fields developed from old pastures or hay fields.

Control Strategy

When the top growth of the plant is removed it is replaced quickly by new shoots arising from buds on the rhizome. In this way, pruning encourages the spread of lambkill, allowing dormant buds to grow. Burning will favour the spread of the weed but consecutive burnings in the fall for three years have been reported to significantly reduce the size of the infestation. Lambkill is currently reduced to acceptable levels by herbicides such as hexazinone (Velpar/Pronone) and it is not a serious threat in most lowbush blueberry fields.

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