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Birdsfoot Trefoil ***(Lotus corniculatus-Fabaceae)***

The summer weed season is winding down for the Byron Forest Preserve District restoration crew. One of the several different invasive species that we concentrated on this summer was the removal of Birdsfoot Trefoil from our prairies. It is commonly seen in northern and central Illinois along our highways.

Birdsfoot Trefoil is an invasive species that was introduced into the United States from Europe. It came to the United States to be used to rejuvenate agricultural lands. It was also used to prevent soil erosion along banks near highways and ditches. This aggressive pest forms dense colonies that tend to exclude other plants. The foliage of this species is mildly toxic to livestock.

This herbaceous perennial plant has round stems that are slightly pubescent (covered with short soft hairs) or hairless. Birdsfoot Trefoil has alternate compound leaves that are trifoliate (a leaf divided into 3 leaflets). Each leaflet grows up to ¾ inches long and about ½ inch across (pictured right). The margins are smooth and the veins are faint and irregular. Its root system consists of a taproot.

Birdsfoot Trefoil can be found in full bloom from May through August. These yellow flowers remain in flower for 1-2 months with a cluster of 3-12 pea like yellow flowers that are produced on long stalks. These flowers are a half-inch long and have 5 petals. At the end of the flowering season, these flowers are replaced by linear seedpods.

The seedpods of the Birdsfoot Trefoil grow up to 1 inch long and are divided into 2 halves. The plant produces 3-5 seedpods that are attached to the end of the seed stalk. Each pod is brown to black in color and contain up to 49 seeds. It reproduces by reseeding itself.

This 6-inch to 2-foot tall plant grows well in full and/or partial sun with average levels of moisture. Birdsfoot Trefoil also prefers loamy soil (a soil with roughly equal proportions of sand, silt, and clay). This invasive species is known for attacking our prairies because of these soil conditions. This plant can also be seen in fields, pastures, roadsides, slopes of drainage ditches, weedy corners of parks, and waste areas.

The restoration staff at Byron Forest Preserve District is managing the areas where Birdsfoot Trefoil is located to eradicate it and, in doing so, provide a region for native species to survive and thrive. We are managing it by controlling and removing this invasive species, whether it is performing a prescribed burn and/or spraying herbicide. Our crew is working diligently to prevent this species, among others, from invading our natural areas.

