

# Chilean Rhubarb

## *Gunnera tinctoria*

**Progressive Control Plant under the  
West Coast Regional Pest Plant  
Management Strategy**



### National Pest Plant Accord Status

Chilean Rhubarb, also known as 'Gunnera,' is listed in the 2008 National Pest Plant Accord (NPPA) and is banned from sale, propagation and distribution in New Zealand. For more information refer to the MAF Biosecurity New Zealand website at [www.biosecurity.govt.nz/nppa](http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/nppa)

### Where has Chilean Rhubarb come from?

Chilean Rhubarb is an herbaceous perennial with very large leaves which was introduced to New Zealand from South America for its interesting form. A vigorous plant in the New Zealand environment, it has spread beyond home gardens over the whole country to encroach into the habitat of native species, especially in coastal areas. Wild Chilean Rhubarb plants have become a problem on coastal cliffs near Cape Foulwind.

### What does Chilean Rhubarb look like?

Chilean Rhubarb grows much like common garden rhubarb but on a giant scale. Mature plant stems reach 1.5 to 2.5m long and are topped with massive, rough surfaced, medium green umbrella-like leaves under which little else grows. The stem and the main veins on the under-surface of the leaves have large reddish barbs.

During spring and early summer the plant grows vigorously forming new stems, leaves and up to 5 yellow flower spikes which rise from the base of the leaves. The flower spikes can reach 1m tall and contain up to 80,000 seeds per head. The level of plant die-back in early winter depends on mean winter temperatures. In frost prone areas it dies right back to the root base but in coastal areas leafage will persist.



Top right: A young Chilean Rhubarb plant [WCRC]  
Above: The difference between Chilean Rhubarb (*G. tinctoria*) and Brazilian Rhubarb (*G. manicata*) seed-heads. Both seed prolifically. [DOC]

### Why is Chilean Rhubarb a Pest Plant?

Chilean Rhubarb can form a monoculture at the expense of other native or pasture species. The prolific seed is spread by both birds and water and broken off pieces of root crown can wash down streams only to re-establish as new plants further down. Chilean Rhubarb is shade tolerant, so that it can gain a hold almost anywhere, and the huge leaves are unpalatable to stock due to the barbs on the stems. In a garden setting, where the seedheads can be removed, it may be manageable, but in the wild the plants can grow up to 3m high and 2-3m wide, shading out other plants and taking over whole areas of both native habitat or pasture land.

The related Brazilian Rhubarb (*Gunnera manicata*) is currently an approved alternative for home gardens (although this may change if this plant also becomes a problem in the wild).

## What are the best methods of control?

A mixed approach may be needed to eradicate all Chilean Rhubarb plants in a given area. Some innovation may be needed for 'hard to get at' plants, e.g. those on cliffs or for really tall plants (up to 3m)

### **Manual Methods**

For small plants dig out carefully, taking care to get all parts of the root. Either send all parts of the plants in black plastic garbage bags to a lined landfill or separate out the leaves and stems and lay them out on black plastic in the sun to dry then rot.

### **Herbicide Methods**

For larger plants the two options are stump-swabbing or spraying. Choice of method is dependant on the location, degree of infestation and size of the plant/s. If nearby plants are wanted, then stump-swabbing is a good choice but if the loss of nearby plants is not a problem spraying may be better.

#### Stump-swabbing

Let the plant attain full growth (early summer) then cut the plant stems down to 10 – 20cm stumps. Apply herbicide concentrate immediately to the stumps using a paintbrush or other applicator. Herbicides recommended are those containing the active ingredients glyphosate (e.g. Roundup Renew, Glyphosate 360, Watkins Weedkiller) OR metsulfuron ((e.g. Escort, Zeal) OR picloram (Vigilant gel). Repeat the following season as necessary.

#### Spraying

Chilean Rhubarb responds well to spraying with both glyphosate and metsulfuron based products (as above) provided the large leaves get good spray coverage. Choice of method will depend on height of the plants and ease of access. Operators should consider if there will be a problem with spray drift if there is a need to spray overhead. Optimal time for spraying is post spring growth but before the flower heads have fully formed, i.e. up until December. If flower heads have formed, cut them off and dispose of separately prior to spraying. Check for regrowth the following season and re-apply herbicide as needed.

- Handgun application: 750mls herbicide/100L water
- Mistblower application: 225mls herbicide/100L water
- Knapsack application: 75mls herbicide/100L water

**For personal safety please use all herbicides as per manufacturer's labelling**

### **Biocontrols**

There are no known biocontrol agents for Chilean Rhubarb at present.

## Where can I get more help?

For further information call either of the Regional Weedbusters Co-ordinators. They are:

**Mary Traves:** Environmental Information Officer, West Coast Regional Council (768 0466 or 0508 800 118)

**Tom Belton:** Technical Support Officer Biosecurity & Weeds, Department of Conservation, West Coast - Tai Poutini Conservancy, Hokitika (03 756 9100)



[www.weedbusters.org.nz](http://www.weedbusters.org.nz)

*The West Coast Regional Council does not accept liability for any advice given on this sheet regarding application of herbicides for pest plant control. The brand names listed imply neither endorsement of those brands, nor criticism of any other brands not listed.*