

# Invasive Alien Plant Species of Virginia

## Johnson Grass (*Sorghum halepense* (L.) Persoon)

### Description

Johnson grass forms dense clumps and grows to eight feet tall. Before the flowers appear, its long, smooth leaves with a white midvein are characteristic. The stems may be pink to rusty red near the base. Its flowering inflorescence is large and loosely branched. It produces reddish-brown seeds which are approximately 1/8th of an inch long. Johnson grass is similar in appearance to eastern grama grass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*), big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) and indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*). Consult an agricultural extension agent or a natural resource specialist if your identification of the plant is in doubt.

### Habitat

Johnson grass occurs in cultivated and abandoned fields, forest edges, streambanks, roadsides, vacant lots or any disturbed ground.

### Distribution

This plant is found in virtually every county and city in Virginia. It was introduced to the United States from its native range around the Mediterranean Sea. In fact, Johnson grass has spread to most warm-temperate regions of the world. It is listed by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services as a noxious weed.

### Threats

Johnson grass is regarded as a major agricultural weed, especially in corn fields, where it forms tall, dense stands. The dead stems and leaves of this perennial herb cover the ground all winter. It aggressively crowds out native species, most often along riverbanks. Along forest edges, it can slow the natural succession of fields to woodlands.

### Control

When cut, the underground stems (rhizomes) of Johnson grass resprout, forming new plants. The plant is resistant to many common herbicides as well. These factors make Johnson grass a pernicious weed. Small stands may be controlled by handpulling the plants when the soil is moist. Severe infestations can be controlled by repeated mowing to kill seedlings. Mature plants, however, require repeated winter tilling to expose and kill root material. Spring burning may encourage regrowth therefore it is not recommended as a control method for this species.

Control of Johnson grass with herbicide requires several applications with proper timing to insure effectiveness. Glyphosate herbicides are recommended because they are biodegradable. However, glyphosate is a nonselective, systemic



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For more information, contact the Department of Conservation and Recreation or the Virginia Native Plant Society.



Department of Conservation & Recreation  
CONSERVING VIRGINIA'S NATURAL AND RECREATIONAL RESOURCES  
217 Governor Street, Richmond, VA 23219  
(804) 786-7951; <http://www.state.va.us/~dcr/vaher.html>

Jim Gilmore, Governor • John Paul Woodley, Jr., Secretary of Natural Resources • David G. Brickley, Director, Department of Conservation and Recreation



### Virginia Native Plant Society

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400 Blandy Farm Lane, Unit 2  
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herbicide which will affect all green vegetation. To be safe and effective, herbicide use requires careful knowledge of the chemicals, appropriate concentrations, and the effective method and timing of application. Consult a natural resource spe-

cialist or an agricultural extension agent before attempting this control measure.

### References

Fernald, M. L. 1950. Gray's Manual of Botany, Eighth edition. American Book Company, New York.

Harvill, A., et. al. 1992. Atlas of the Virginia Flora. Virginia Botanical Association, Burkesville.

Hutchinson, M. 1992. Vegetation Management Guide: Johnson Grass. Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.

**Illustration by Donna Smith.**

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