

Giant Asian Dodder

Invasive Plant Detected in Houston



Giant Asian dodder invades shrubs and a tree along a Houston street.

What is giant Asian dodder? It is an exotic parasitic plant recently introduced into Houston that kills trees and landscape plants. Giant Asian dodder (*Cuscuta japonica* Choisy) is also called Japanese dodder, “devil’s hair,” “devil’s guts,” or “strangleweed.”

How it first arrived in Texas is unknown. But, now it has been found in Houston attacking street trees and landscape plants in several neighborhoods. Since dodder was first discovered in August 2001, the City of Houston has been working to destroy known infestations and keep it from spreading.

How do I identify giant Asian dodder?

Giant Asian dodder is a yellow-green vine that resembles spaghetti (see photos). It attacks at least 20 different plant species in southern Texas, including ornamental trees and shrubs such as live oak, crapemyrtle and wax leaf Ligustrum.



Dodder vines are about the diameter of a pencil.

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How does it kill trees and shrubs?

Dodder lacks the chlorophyll that makes plants green. Thus, it must feed off a living host in order to obtain its nutrients. This parasitic action drains the host of vital resources needed for healthy growth. Giant Asian dodder will weaken and eventually kill any tree or plant it grows on.



Dodder vines attach themselves to plants with specialized root-like structures.

Photo by Colin Purrington,
Swarthmore College, PA

How does it spread? Giant Asian dodder grows as much as 6 inches per day! It can rapidly spread by growing from one infected plant to healthy plants nearby. It can also spread to new areas in at least two other ways; by fragmentation and, potentially, by seed production.

Fragmentation. This known means of spread occurs when pieces of the dodder vine break off from the main plant and are transferred to another host. Fragmentation is considered the most common way dodder is spread to new locations in Houston. New dodder plants produced from these fragments establish a connection to the host to obtain necessary nutrients, and continue to grow. In this way, vehicles, animals, birds, or humans unintentionally may easily spread dodder from one location to another.

Seed production. In the spring, the dodder plant produces flowers which, in turn, may yield seed for a new generation of dodder plants. Dodder seeds are the size of coffee grains and can remain dormant in the soil for 10-20 years. Usually most seed will sprout the following year. Although flowers have been seen on dodder plants in Houston, no seed has been observed to date.



Dodder vines look like spaghetti on trees and shrubs.

How can dodder be controlled? In a coordinated effort, the City of Houston, the Texas Forest Service, and several other state and federal agencies are working together to eradicate giant Asian dodder from known sites in Houston. The goal is to prevent this alien pest from becoming well established and spreading over a wider area. The first step is to locate all new infestations. Once located and identified, dodder can be controlled or eradicated with herbicides, removal and disposal of infected host plants, or pruning of infected branches. To be successful, we need your help in locating new infestations.

Who do I contact if I find dodder in my neighborhood?

If you find giant Asian dodder within the City of Houston, contact:

Victor Cordova,
Parks and Recreation Department
2999 S. Wayside, Houston, TX 77023
Phone: 713-867-0378
e-mail: victor.cordova@cityofhouston.net.

or
Mickey Merritt
Texas Forest Service
2020 North Loop West, Suite 106
Houston, TX 77018
Phone: 713-688-8931
e-mail: mmerritt@tfs.tamu.edu

If you find giant Asian dodder outside of Houston, or for more information on Giant Asian dodder and its control, contact:

Kim Camilli
Texas Forest Service, P.O. Box 15083
Austin, Texas 78761
Phone: 512-371-7011
e-mail: kcamilli@tfs.tamu.edu)

or visit the Texas Forest Service web page at <http://texasforests.tamu.edu/forest/pest/default.asp> and select "Giant Asian Dodder," under Parasitic Plants.

