

WEED ALERT

SIAM WEED – COMING HOME WITH THE TROOPS?

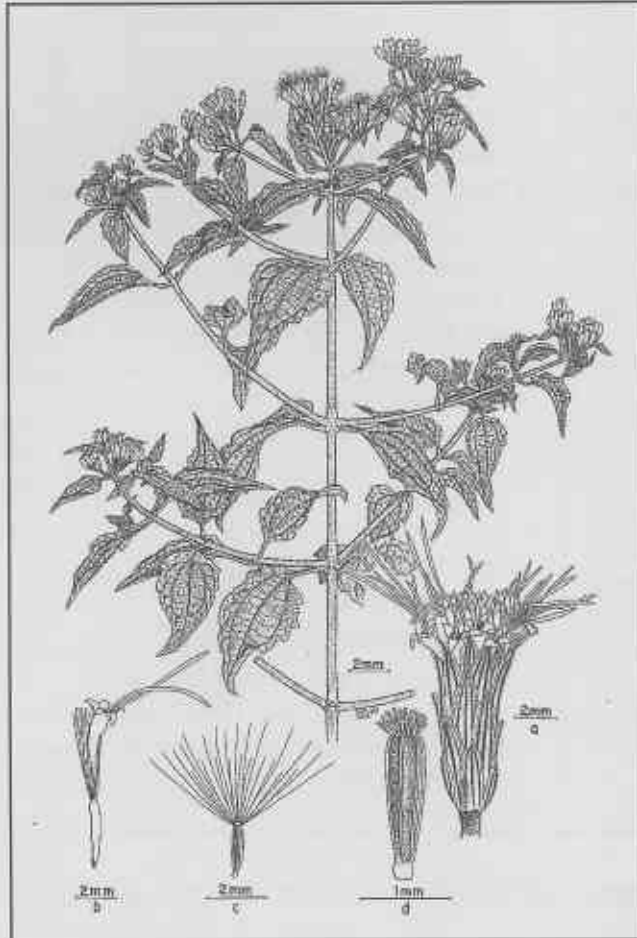
by Barbara Waterhouse

SIAM WEED (*Chromolaena odorata*) is one of the most serious tropical weeds one can expect to encounter. Originally from South America, it has been introduced and become aggressively invasive in West Africa, South Africa, the Indian subcontinent, southeast Asia and the Pacific. A small infestation which was noted near Tully in far north Queensland in 1994 is more or less under control – at a cost (so far) of nearly \$1 million.

The plant is a perennial shrub which forms tangled masses to 3m tall in open areas, but can scramble up to 5-10m along forest margins. It produces fluffy pinkish-white flowers between June and September, which result in millions of seeds attached to a parachute that floats them away on the wind. It can form impenetrable thickets and smother ground layer and shrub vegetation. It is a serious weed of riverbanks and disturbed sites, and will smother plantations, tree seedlings regenerating after logging, crops and pastures, as well as natural areas. In sites with wet and dry seasons, such as the Kimberley, it dries off after flowering, burns readily at this stage, then resprouts from the rootstock. It is unpalatable to stock, but toxic if inadvertently eaten – perhaps if included in fodder in feedlots.

The risk from Timor

Siam weed is widespread across Indonesia, including Timor and Irian Jaya and is spreading rapidly through PNG. The next time you see news footage from East Timor,



pay attention to the roadside weeds and background “greenery” – much of it is Siam weed, which is widespread within Dili as well as in more rural areas.

Siam weed is notorious for spreading in association with military personnel and equipment. It hitched rides across the Pacific on military vehicles during WWII. The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) realised that it was the biggest risk of the possible threats that could return with the troops from Timor. The detection of Siam weed seeds in the footwell of a UN vehicle brought to Darwin for repairs in October provided convincing evidence that this was not just a “perceived” risk, but the real thing.

A team of AQIS officers worked in Dili, cleaning vehicles before they were shipped back to Australia (this sometimes involved dismantling vehicles and/or engines), while a second team in Darwin checked personnel. In all of this, the Defence Department has been wonderfully helpful and co-operative.

But the probability is that, despite all the care, some seeds will slip through.

Where you come in

There will be ongoing surveillance near military bases, but it is actually more likely that concealed seed will be “bounced off” during exercises in rough terrain.

Siam weed could grow in coastal regions of Australia from the Kimberley across to the eastern seaboard, possibly down as far as north-eastern Victoria. If you live in the north of WA, or if you go north for your holidays, collect a pressed specimen of any plant you are suspicious of, and check it with a Community Herbarium, or the Weed Science section of AgWEST.

Remember, this latest incursion by Siam weed hasn’t happened (quite) yet, but it (probably) will happen, and it is (probably) coming to a site near you!

Barbara Waterhouse is a botanist with AQIS's Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy based in Mareeba, Qld. For more information, contact the following website: <http://www.agric.wa.gov.au/progserv/plants/weeds/clerol/siam.htm>