

# Downy rose myrtle is pretty, but not good for isle environment

## Kia'i Moku

By Joylynn Paman



Downy rose myrtle set temporary roots on Maui several years

ago. Planted by a Ha'ikū resident who appreciated its rose colored flowers, the eye-catching evergreen shrub added aesthetic value to the owner's property. Several small plants quickly took hold in their new home, soon forming a decorative 20 foot hedge along the roadside. Unbeknownst to the owner, this pretty hedge posed a serious threat to the environment of Maui. Downy rose myrtle is a state noxious weed, known for invading high-value natural landscapes. When the hedge was discovered by officials, they informed the owner of the potential consequences of allowing the hedge to remain, go to seed, and spread throughout Maui County. The cooperative owner agreed to have the plants removed, replacing them with hibiscus, an attractive, non-invasive alternative.

Here on Maui, downy rose myrtle has the potential to invade and cause devastation. Easily spread by fruit-eating birds and mammals that unwittingly deposit viable seeds wherever they travel, downy rose myrtle forms dense thickets. It displaces native plants by overcrowding and competing for space. It is well-adapted to fire and can regenerate quickly after such a disaster. Large infestations may ultimately alter the natural fire cycle and

management of invaded areas. If downy rose myrtle is not detected and controlled early on Maui, it is likely to find its way into the pristine native habitats that are most vulnerable to invasion.

Downy rose myrtle was first brought into Hawai'i in 1920, far from its native lands spanning Southeast Asia from India to the Philippines. By the 1950s, the pest species had naturalized on Kaua'i and Island of Hawai'i, creating large impenetrable thickets. On the Garden Isle, downy rose myrtle took over abandoned cane fields. It is now found growing in dense populations along major roadsides and many low-lying areas. Maui has had three known downy rose myrtle locations in the past—all of which have been controlled. Today it is possible that Maui is free of the pest, but with the steady influx of plants from neighboring islands and accelerated seed dispersal by birds, downy rose myrtle may be reintroduced. It is critical that Maui citizens become familiar with this invasive species and know how to report it if rediscovered to prevent its establishment and the destruction seen on neighboring islands.

The evergreen shrub typically grows to six feet tall, but can reach much greater heights. Its three-inch long leaves are glossy green above and light green with dense soft hairs below. The underside of the leaf has a distinct feature: three main veins running up from the base. During the spring, downy rose myrtle blooms profusely. Its one inch wide rose-pink flowers blossom alone or in clus-



**Downy rose myrtle** typically grows to 6 feet tall but can reach much greater heights. Its 3-inch-long leaves are glossy green above and light green with dense soft hairs below. The underside of the leaf has a distinct feature: three main veins running up from the base. Flowers bloom profusely in the spring.

Photo: Forest & Kim Starr, USGS

ters. Its bluish-purple fruit is similar to a blueberry, a half inch across.

The Hawai'i Department of Agriculture has recognized downy rose myrtle's invasive characteristics as being a major threat to the islands and has designated it as a State noxious weed. It is illegal to move downy rose myrtle or any vegetative part into uninfested areas.

Help the Maui Invasive Species Committee by keeping an eye out for downy rose myrtle and detecting it early on. If you discover a location, report it to the Maui Invasive Species Committee at 573-MISC (6472). Do not plant or spread this pest in your

garden. Instead, plant alternative species that are non-invasive and better yet, go native. Do not purchase downy rose myrtle plants or seeds. If you see it for sale in Hawai'i, notify MISC or the Hawai'i Dept. of Agriculture immediately. Help stop the spread of invasive species and do your part to keep Maui nō ka 'oi.

• *"Kia'i Moku" (or "Guarding the Island") is prepared by the Maui Invasive Species Committee to provide information on protecting the island from invasive plants and animals that can threaten the island's environment, economy and quality of life. Joylynn Paman, is public relations and education specialist with the MISC.*