

The Situation with Suksdorf's Hawthorn

By George L. Kral

Up until twenty years ago, there were probably more Suksdorf's hawthorn (black hawthorn, or *Crataegus gaylussacia*) in the Willamette Valley than anywhere else on Earth. This unassuming small tree is a workhorse here, filling in hedgerows, streambanks and the margins of woodlands. In spring, our native hawthorn produces masses of white, insect-pollinated flowers. Its prolific, reliable crops of jet-black fruit ripen in late summer and fall to a sweet-starchy pulp that is a staple for flocks of songbirds. Dense thickets of these spiny little trees provide cover and structure for all manner of wildlife.

But now, in the heart of the Willamette Valley, most of the Suksdorf's hawthorn are dead or dying, and the pattern of decline is rapidly spreading to the margins of the valley and into the foothills. It was clear something was going on with these trees by 2008, and it became so extreme along the I-5 corridor between Canby and Salem that I called up Alan Kanaskie, Forest Pathologist at ODF, to see if he knew

anything about it. "Yeah, I have noticed they aren't looking good," he said. When I asked if anyone else had brought this to his attention, he replied "Nope." I sent a number of samples, first to Alan, then again later to the pathology lab at Oregon State. The diagnoses—stress pathogens and symptoms typical of environmentally driven decline.

As far as I am aware, this has been the only investigation into a tree decline that has claimed at this point hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions of hawthorn, within direct daily view of Salem. To this day, there has been no mention in the press or government publications of the mass death of native hawthorn in the Willamette Valley. Apparently nobody loves, or even notices, these poor little trees dying by the tens of thousands along Oregon's highways and byways. This is a situation that needs to change. We all need to notice when something as profound as massive die-offs of important species occur. Once we notice, and then realize that we are the cause of these events,

perhaps we will speak up and make changing our behaviors a priority.

In the case of widespread tree declines in this state, there are two major causes—climate change and introduced insects and diseases. While we spend energy and air-time anxiously debating who will be the next US president—an outcome over which Oregonians have essentially zero influence—we do have the ability to begin changing the behaviors and social structures that are killing our forests and compromising the natural systems that support us. Rejecting foreign products that bring pests and diseases here, rebuilding our economy around local ag and industry and reducing our use of fossil fuels all have the potential to change the long-term trajectory of our local ecosystems and to promote local prosperity. Let's focus our public discourse on making these positive changes.

Oh...also...please plant hawthorns. They, and the birds, bees and other wildlife that depend on them, need our help now.



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