Controlling blue morning glory by hand

Controlling morning glory by hand is possible, but requires some dedication and persistence.

Getting the best out of your efforts requires some knowledge of how morning glory functions and what to do / what not to do. This fact sheet is aimed at giving you a better picture of how to go about getting the best results. If you already tackle your morning glory by hand, most of the information won’t be anything new to you.

The weed
Morning glory is an environmental weed that was introduced into Australia as an easily cultivated ornamental plant. It was a popular as a cover for an arbour, outhouse or chook run, as it grew readily, provided year round shade and had a spectacular flower display.

In our sub-tropical climate, this tropical American climber grows rampantly if allowed to. The invasive vine tends to grow along forest edges, roadsides and waste lands where it smothers vegetation.

In Australia, morning glory seed production is very rare. The weed is spread by the movement of stem pieces. This is through dumping, slasher movements, being a contaminant of soil or other materials, or possibly even by birds carrying pieces to use as nesting material.

So the message from this is that once the plant is totally controlled, there will be no regeneration as you get with other seeding plants (such as cobbler’s pegs). But small pieces of stem and vine may regrow if they are in contact with the soil.

Control approach
The general approach for tackling weeds is to start with the least weedy area and work back towards the most weedy. This is a basic principle of bush regeneration. But sometimes – especially with canopy killer vines like morning glory – you’ll need to protect mature trees by freeing them up from strangulation. Also, human nature kicks in and we tend to want to do everything at once, and so pick the biggest area of weeds first.

Large established plants
Tackling large established morning glory infestations by hand removal isn’t the recommended approach unless you can contribute a lot of your time to the effort and on a regular basis. These vines tend to have an extensive network of stems that will be taking root along their entire length, which are difficult to remove without causing a lot of soil disturbance and leaving pieces of the stem in the ground to regrow later.

The recommended approach for dealing with these established vines is to use one of the herbicide techniques. Details on these techniques can be found on similar fact sheets for using herbicides to kill morning glory (available from Moreton Bay Regional Council).
If you cannot use herbicides, then you must be prepared to invest a lot of your time into the careful removal of stems and roots. You’ll then need to spend time and money rehabilitating any resulting soil disturbance.

If the plants are mature and climbing into the tree canopy, cut the vines. This will give the canopy immediate relief from being strangled by the vine. Pulling the vines from the trees is unnecessary and may damage the desirable host plants.

Trace the vines to the ground and pull them up in the direction back along where the vines have grown from. By doing it this way, you are less likely to break the vine where it may be rooted to the ground. You may find a lot of the stem is buried just below the surface, and will pull away reasonably easily (taking care not to break the vine).

The control of smaller plants by hand is easier. Using the same technique of pulling them up in the direction back along where the vines have grown from, the main root can then be dug out or pulled up if the soil is soft enough.

Don’t leave any of the removed material in contact with the ground, as it will easily take root. Some regrowth from the remaining roots and from stems is to be expected, meaning that you will need to regularly revisit the site and check for new vines.

Realities of hand removal
The major success criteria with hand removal of any weeds are that you have to be able to commit a lot of time and commit it fairly frequently. If you can’t meet either one of these, then you should think carefully about what it is you want to achieve and how you need to go about it.

A lack of available time can only be remedied by making the time, by buying someone else’s time (i.e. a contractor) or by ‘cheating’ and using a herbicide to speed up the control process.

The reality is, don’t commit to doing morning glory control by hand if you can’t commit to the time (or money) required.

Follow up
It is vital that a regular follow-up program be maintained. Be aware that this will have to continue over a couple of years.

Once the main plants have been controlled, a sweep through the area every 3 months will be enough to keep on top of the regrowth.

The best thing about morning glory is that they don’t produce viable seed. So if you get rid of all the stems and runners through persistence, you can eradicate the weed from your property.