Controlling cat’s claw creeper by hand

Controlling cat’s claw creeper by hand without the use of herbicides is extremely difficult, and is not a recommended control technique.

This is due to the fact that the weedy vine develops large, deep growing underground tubers. The tubers are also often around and amongst the roots of nearby trees and shrubs.

Trying to remove these by hand will end up causing significant soil disturbance and may kill surrounding vegetation by damaging their roots.

The vines cling very strongly onto trunks, branches and vegetation, so pulling vines out of the trees will only cause significant damage to the host plants.

To seriously tackle cat’s claw creeper, there is no other practical option other than to use a herbicide to treat plants with established underground tubers. Hand control techniques are really only suitable for removing seedling plants.

The weed
Cat’s claw creeper is the most serious weedy vine pest we have in south-east Queensland.

It reproduces by seed and by producing underground tubers – so its ability to survive and spread is extreme.

Seed is mostly spread by the wind, but it will also spread in water. Research suggests that although water dispersal is not significant, the seed does spread it a lot further than with wind.

The seed reaches maturity 8-10 months after flowering (in July) and amazingly, many seeds can produce multiple seedlings – up to 3. Luckily, the seeds are not long-lived, with them generally not surviving longer than 12 months. In fact, up to 70% of the seeds will germinate in the first 3 months of their maturity. Research has found that they will germinate no matter if they are deeply shaded or in full sun.

These seed characteristics are important to understand, as if you can control the large seeding plants, you should only have to deal with seedlings for the first 12 months or so, and after that there should be no seed-bank left in the soil. Realistically, you will also have to deal with underground tuber regrowth, which can take many years to bring under effective control.

Another important growth habit is that, for the first year of the new vines life, it tends to grow on the ground and produce larger leaves. This stage of its life is all about developing the underground tuber. So, producing larger leaves across the ground means that the plant can capture more sunlight, turning it into starchy sugars and in turn building up its tubers.
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 with cat’s claw creeper, almost the exact opposite is the case.

Because of the short-lived seeds, the most effective thing you can do first is to control the mature vines up the trees. This has the dual effect of freeing up the strangled trees and stopping the vines from seeding.

At the same time, the outlying plants (which will be younger and smaller) can be controlled to contain the infestation to the one area.

After this, the approach is to persist with the resprouting mature plants, control the juvenile plants (i.e., the ground-dwelling plants less than 12 months old) and remove the seedlings.

Realities of hand removal
The reality is with cat’s claw creeper, hand removal of anything other than seedlings is a waste of time and will cause more harm than good.

Restrict your hand removal to seedlings.
Germinating seeds start to develop a tuber from their very beginnings. Simply pulling out the seedlings with the tuber attached will only be possible in very young seedlings or if the soil is sandy or very soft.

Generally speaking, you’ll have to dig down a bit to loosen the tuber in order to remove it entirely. A complicating feature is that a seedling that has been growing for a while will produce a string of tubers along the main root. Leave any of these behind and you will end up with the vine sprouting and regrowing.

So, the recommended way to deal with cat’s claw creeper is to deal with the larger plants using a herbicide and only attempt hand removal of seedlings.

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.

Realistically, the effort needed will drop away after the first six months. Once the main plants have been controlled, a sweep through the area every 3 months will be enough to keep on top of the seedlings – remember that 70% of the seeds germinate in the first 3 months of their release, and they don’t last much longer than a year.