Controlling Dutchman’s pipe by hand

Controlling Dutchman’s pipe by hand is possible, but requires some dedication and persistence.

Getting the best out of your efforts requires some knowledge of how Dutchman’s pipe 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 Dutchman’s pipe by hand, most of the information won’t be anything new to you.

The weed
Dutchman’s pipe is Class 3 declared weed under the Land Management (Pest and Stock Route Management) Act 2002. It was once widely promoted as an unusual, easily cultivated ornamental plant. It was a popular novelty in gardens and suburban backyards and has naturalised in several areas of South East Queensland.

Dutchman’s pipe has a preference for moist, fertile soils making it a prime invader of rainforest habitats.

Dutchman’s pipe is similar to the native Aristolochia praevenosa, which is a natural food plant for a number of Australian butterflies. Dutchman’s pipe however is a deadly alternative, tricking butterflies into laying their eggs on its leaves, and then poisoning the larvae when they hatch and begin to feed. The survival of the rare Richmond birdwing butterfly (Ornithoptera richmondi) is threatened by this weed.

Seed is mostly spread by the wind, but it will also spread in water. There has not been a great deal of research into the ecology of Dutchman’s pipe, and so little is known of its behaviour under different circumstances or how long the seed is viable in the soil.

The plant is sometimes used in traditional herbal medicines, but extracts of this group of plants have been found to cause kidney damage and urinary tract cancer. Their supply, sale or use in therapeutic goods is prohibited in Australia.

The plant also releases a pungent smell, particularly if the stem is damaged. For this reason – and the poisonous properties – it is suggested that you wear gloves when hand removing the vine.

Control approach
The control approach for hand removing Dutchman’s pipe depends on the size of the plant.

If the plants are mature and climbing into the tree canopy, cut the vines, preferably before they have developed fruits. 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).

You will get back to the point where the vine originally germinated. From here the main roots of the vine will need to be carefully dug out. Any main lateral roots thicker than a pencil could potentially regrow. You also need to take care that you don’t cause significant soil disturbance or root damage to desirable plants.

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 seeds 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 (ie a contractor) or by ‘cheating’ and using a herbicide to speed up the control process.

The reality is, don’t commit to doing Dutchman’s pipe 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.

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.