

Plant hormones help battle purple witchweed, major threat to sub-Saharan Africa's staple crops

Striga hermonthica, also known as purple witchweed, is an invasive parasitic plant threatening sub-Saharan Africa's food production. *Striga* infects the region's staple crops such as pearl millet, sorghum, and other [cereal crops](#).

Striga has an Achilles heel, though. As a parasite that attaches to the roots of other plants, it dies when it cannot find a host plant to attach to. Scientists found a way to exploit *Striga*'s Achilles' heel to eradicate it from [farmers'](#) fields. A research team from the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology [found that they could trick](#) *Striga* seeds to think that a host plant grows nearby. *Striga* seeds germinate, but do not survive without a host plant to attach to.

The scientists use plant hormones exuded by plant roots called strigolactones. These hormones trigger *Striga* seeds to germinate. By treating bare crop fields in Burkina Faso with artificial strigolactones, the scientists found that they were able to reduce the number of *Striga* plants by more than half. This method will allow farmers and scientists to work together to fight the spread of *Striga* plant, protecting the food security of 300 million people in the region.

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