false spiraea

Sorbaria sorbifolia (L.) A. Braun

Synonyms: *Schizonotus sorbifolius* (L.) Lindl., *Spiraea sorbifolia* Linnaeus, *Sorbaria sorbifolia var. stellipila* Maximowicz, *S. stellipila* (Maximowicz) C. K. Schneider
Other common name(s): Ural false spiraea, ash-leaved spiraea
Family: Rosaceae

Invasiveness Rank: **Not Ranked -** The invasiveness rank is calculated based on a species' ecological impacts, biological attributes, distribution, and response to control measures. The ranks are scaled from 0 to 100, with 0 representing a plant that poses no threat to native ecosystems and 100 representing a plant that poses a major threat to native ecosystems.

Figure 1 False spiraea (Sorbaria sorbifolia). Photo by Robert Videki.

Description

False spiraea is a perennial shrub that grows from 1 to 3 m tall. Leaves are pinnately dissected and 14 to 30 cm long by 5 to 17 cm wide. Leaflets are usually 11 to 21 in quantity, oblong-ovate to elliptic in shape, usually 35 to 75 mm long by 12 to 20 mm wide, lower surface hairless or with sparse, star-shaped hairs. The upper surface of the leaves with some simple hairs near the margins, but otherwise hairless. Inflorescence is a feathery panicle usually 10 to 15 cm in length. Flowers are 10 to 14 mm diameter and typically white. Petals are ovate to orbiculate in shape and 2.7 to 4.3 mm long by 2.1 to 3.4 mm wide. Stamen can number up to 50 in quantity but are usually around 30, variable in length but usually two times as long as petals. Styles are 1.3 to 3.5 mm long. Hypanthium hairless or hairy with short and fine, short and stiff/course, or star-shaped hairs with many branches originating from base. Pedicels are usually hairy with fine, short hairs. Sepals are ovate to oblong-ovate in shape and often with glandular-serrate margins. Fruits are follicles, 4.5 to 6 mm long and pubescent (Henrickson 2020, Tomaszewski 2001).

Similar Species: Mountain ash (*Sorbus spp.*) can be confused with false spiraea. Mountain ash species can also be large shrubs with pinnately compound leaves but, unlike false spiraea, have a flat-topped inflorescence and bear bright red fruit. The leaflets of Mountain ash species are also typically pubescent beneath where the leaflets of false spirea are typically hairless beneath.

Native species that may be superficially confused with false spiraea include rose

Last Updated: 2026-1-13 Colette Martinez

spiraea (*Spiraea douglasii*), and beauverd spiraea (*Spiraea stevenii*). False spiraea can be distinguished from spiraea species by the presence of pinnately compound leaves rather than simple leaves. (Henrickson 2020, Hultén 1968).

Figure 2 False spiraea (Sorbaria sorbifolia). Photo by Nick Kurzenko.

Ecological Impact

Impact on community composition, structure, and interactions: False spiraea is a strong competitor that spreads via root suckers (Straigyte and Benicsis 2010). *S. sorbifolia* leaves and shoots limit light availability and it has been shown to lead to the disappearance of competing light-loving vegetation (Veselkin et al. 2020). Colonies could impact nutrient cycling because of the persistence of leaf litter on the forest floor (Czortek et al 2025). False spiraea is a known host of the bacterial phytopathogen *Rhodococcus fascians* (Miller and Putnam 2010).

Impact on ecosystem processes: Leaves are very slow to decompose and contain high levels of hydrogen cyanide. Leaf litter may contribute toxic compounds that change environmental conditions on and below the soil surface (Lanta et al. 2015). False spiraea is also often planted to stabilize slopes (Tomaszewski 2001).

Biology and Invasive Potential

Reproductive potential: False spiraea is a successful vegetative reproducer from an extensive horizontal root system. Aggressive root sucker propagules emerge from rhizomes (Straigyte and Benicsis 2010).

Role of disturbance in establishment: False spiraea commonly establishes in open, disturbed habitats and is often planted in loose, well drained agricultural/garden soils (Henrickson 2020). Invasions typically occur near the designed landscape where it was planted (Tomaszewski 2001).

Potential for long-distance dispersal: Plants are mostly colonial without mechanisms for long-distance dispersal without human facilitation.

Potential to be spread by human activity: Commonly planted as a garden ornamental and was likely introduced to Alaska through this pathway (AKEPIC 2026).

Germination requirement: No information on germination requirements found. Herbaria records show this plant growing in varying soil conditions typically with roadside vegetation, open herbaceous meadows, and forest edges (CPNWH 2026). (UAM 2026).

Growth requirements: False spiraea prefers moist or dry loose soils but may be found growing in denser, less porous clay soils.

Distribution and Abundance

Native and current distribution: False spiraea is native to temperate Asia (USDA, ARS 2017). In North America, it establishes on roadsides, old fields, waste areas, and overgrown forest margins (Henrickson 2020). False spiraea is known to occur in and around Fairbanks, Big Lake, Anchorage, and the Kenai peninsula northwest of Nikiski (AKEPIC 2026, CPNWH 2026). It is present

in Washington and occurs mostly unbroken from the upper Midwest to the East Coast, north through the Northeast, and in Canada in the Yukon Territory and from Alberta east to Nova Scotia (USDA, NRCS 2017) Brouillet et al 2010+). For the most up-to-date distribution information for Alaska, please visit the AKEPIC database.

Legal Listings

- Has not been declared noxious in AK, Canada or other states.

Management

False spiraea has been managed mechanically in the United States by hand pulling and cutting back larger plants to weaken the root systems (Williams et al. 2021).

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