Ailanthus altissima is much studied with a remarkable history and has made its presence felt as an invasive species across the globe. Although the USA is worst affected A. altissima is naturalized across much of Europe. Basel in Switzerland has a clearing programme in place; in Australia it is a declared weed in New South Wales and Victoria; in New Zealand it is listed under the National Pest Plant Accord and classed an “unwanted organism”.

Originally planted as a street tree, several studies in various states have shown the plants to be thriving along highways, roads, railway lines and spreading steadily. Ailanthus altissima is exceptionally pollution-tolerant and able to effectively store water in the root system rendering it exceptionally drought-tolerant. No wonder it is frequently found in areas where few trees can survive.

**Identification:** Mature trees are tall (up to 20m) and spreading (up to 10m). Deciduous for a short period, the dark green, yellow-tinged compound leaves and reddish-brown stems of young plants are disproportionately large (up to 1m). The individual leaflets are characterised by 1-4 basal gland-bearing teeth. The male flowers and crushed leaves have an unpleasant smell. The small greenish-yellow flowers appear Oct – Nov in large terminal sprays, followed by striking rust-red seeds. The leaves and flowers are poisonous and these and the bark are skin irritants. Dormant during the winter months, the trunks have the appearance of leafless dead trees and we tend to lose sight of Ailanthus Altissima’s unwelcome presence.

**Invasive status:** *A. altissima* (Cat 1b) is an opportunistic plant that thrives in full sun and disturbed areas. It spreads aggressively both by wind-dispersed seeds and root suckers, re-sprouting rapidly after being cut. The aggressive root system damages underground sewers and pipes. *A. altissima* produces an allopathic chemical (a biochemical inhibiting the growth, survival and reproduction of other species) called “ailanthone”. The chemicals are strongest in the bark and roots, and also found in the leaves, wood and seeds of the plant. Along highways in the USA it often forms dense thickets in which few other tree species are present, largely due to the toxins it produces to prevent competition. In the USA its devastating invasive habits have given rise to several unsavoury names such as “Tree of Hell”.

**Control:** No specific herbicide is currently registered for this species in South Africa. In the United States both the non-selective Glyphosate and selective Triclopyr herbicides are used successfully. Both are systemic herbicides that affect the whole plant. A foliar spray on saplings and very low stem cuts on more mature specimens immediately followed by herbicide application to the cut surfaces with regular follow-up would be the best option.