

Why Are Invasive Plants A Problem?

By Jackie Algon

Walking along the roads in the mornings, it's been shocking to see the number of invasive plants that have established themselves in our local environment. Our New England landscape has been transformed by invasive plants or non-native species. We are overrun with them--garlic mustard, oriental bittersweet, barberry, burning bush, wild grape and wild raspberry, common reed in and around our ponds, multiflora and rugosa roses, artemesia (mugwort), stilt grass, mile-a-minute vine, Japanese knotweed, porcelain berry vine, black swallow-wort, and many more. In fact, our Connecticut invasive plant list now has more than 100 entries!



Native Cardinal Flowers and Jewel Weed by a stream in Redding.

What's the difference, at least they're green, we may think, but there is a big difference. Important native plants are being squeezed out of their native habitats, replaced by invasive plants that use the limited light, water and nutrients available to reproduce themselves, often at a much faster rate than natives. Invasive plants provide little or nothing for local wildlife to eat, including friendly insects needed for pollination. Trees weighed down with vines are more susceptible to storm damage and more likely to fall down in high winds, as the trees lose flexibility while covered with tight and heavy vines. In addition invasive vines choke out and smother the young trees that would normally grow in as replacements for downed trees, thus affecting forest regeneration. Japanese barberry, a haven for ticks, also inhibits forest regrowth and has replaced many of our native trees and shrubs. Native plants are crucial for native insects, butterflies, moths and other pollinators, also in providing food for birds and small mammals. Non-native plants that do have edible seeds quickly become established when birds scatter the seeds after ingesting them.

Sound overwhelming? Because it's a massive problem, it's best to take it one step at a time. Consider which plants are easy to eradicate by hand-pulling before they flower and go to seed, or by cutting near the ground to deplete the seed bank and weaken the root structure over a period of several growing seasons. Mowing or pulling stilt grass, an annual, before it goes to seed can help stop this new invasive. Cutting oriental bittersweet down and leaving one leaf with a dab of herbicide can help stop oriental bittersweet over time. Expect to have to continue eradication efforts over a

period of some years - perhaps three to five years to successfully remove established invasives.

While removing or containing non-natives should give the over-shadowed natives a chance to re-establish over a period of years, it is also desirable to put in some of the recommended native replacements listed below. Remember that any soil disturbance may allow invasives to move in, so try to minimize soil disturbance during invasive removal.

Implementing a plan to eradicate invasives *on your own property* is the best way to help – it will make your environment healthier and more beautiful, for your family and for the wildlife your landscape supports, attracting pollinators such as butterflies, bees and hummingbirds.

Volunteering to help eradicate and replant in our parks and set-asides is another way to help; if you're willing to help on a weekend, please contact us at info@norwalkriver.org or your town's Conservation Commission, and put your name on the list of volunteers for clean-ups!