

INVASIVES: Not Just Kudzu

It seems a shame to bid farewell to the magic of April with a discussion of invasive species. We are always reluctant to admit that a plant we have used and loved was really not a good choice. We do understand that as knowledge has increased of how ecosystems function, we know that what had a purpose in one part of the world, may be a menace when imported into a different ecosystem.

Although we have stopped planting the Bradford pear because it didn't age well, breaking up under duress, we regret learning it had become invasive. This pretty spring-flowering pear with the perfect oval shape was introduced in 1963 as the answer to the need for a small street-friendly tree. It was not brand new: it had come from China in 1908 with E.H. 'Chinese' Wilson who had earned his nickname by his unswerving determination to bring the glories of the East to the West.

This pear was first used as rootstock for eating pears in an attempt to avoid the fireblight to which fruiting pears were subject. The Bradford pear was selected at the USDA experimental farm in Glenn Dale Md. and named in honor of a former horticulturist there. To make a sad story even sadder, when breeders tried to correct the inherent problems of the Bradford pear's weak joints, they introduced cultivars that had lost one quality that distinguished the Bradford pear, its sterility. As a result this pear has become invasive in some areas of the mid-Atlantic and Southeast.

Not all unwanted species are aliens: one wetland pest, *Pragmites*, a tall perennial grass with galloping roots, is native to North America although some experts suggest an aggressive strain may have been imported from Europe. Or is it perhaps a 'bad seed' despite excellent parentage?

We may think a trade-off of one species for another in the ecosystem is not all that serious, but it is. For example, wetlands taken over by *Pragmites* provide less food and habitat for species of wildlife and even alters the land itself, drying out what was once a needed wetland.

As do many of you, I spend countless hours pulling out plants I never planted such as Japanese honeysuckle, *Lonicera japonica*, Japanese stiltgrass, *Microstegium vimineum*, and Chinese privet, *Ligustrum sinense*. I have been spared multiflora rose, oriental bittersweet, *Celastrus orbiculatus*, tree-of-heaven, *Ailanthus altissima* and autumn olive, *Elaeagnus umbellata*.

These few are considered highly invasive in Virginia among others too numerous to list. A great part of the problem has been the extreme cost of clearing them out where their presence is damaging to other species. In Virginia alone, the cost is estimated to be at least \$1 billion each and every year. Saturday, May 2, is actually the first "Invasive Plant Removal Day", an effort organized by groups in Northern Virginia.

To find out what may be happening in our area you may check out

www.virginiamasternaturalist.org.invasives/index.html.

It may be a good idea for each of us to check our own property for these troublesome plants. I have several volunteer barberries, probably spread by birds, which resemble the *Berberis thunbergii* 'Rose Glow' which I planted years ago. When I checked the list from the Va. Department of Conservation and Recreation, it was listed as 'especially troublesome'.

One invasive I had just a sprout of was the Empress tree, *Paulownia tomentosa*. When adult, this tree has racemes of purple flowers in spring and you see it in fallow fields here and there. Years ago there was one on the corner of Main St. and Rte 14 near Longbridge Ordinary. It is curious in that the sprouts have huge dissimilar leaves, neat and tropical. By cutting it off at the roots you will eventually kill it. Big trees are another matter. Several years ago there was a spate of tree-napping as the wood was valued in the Orient for bridal chests. However not enough were stolen and they remain a handsome nuisance.

I do keep pulling out English ivy, *Hedera helix*, and wintercreeper, *Euonymus fortunei*, as a gesture toward good citizenship but I will admit that, should I find it in my garden, I could not bear to part with the small low-growing lesser celandine, *Ranunculus ficaria*, a dear thing with a yellow daisy-like bloom and shiny green leaves.