

The Green Menace

Understanding Invasive Plants

What is an Introduced Invasive Plant?

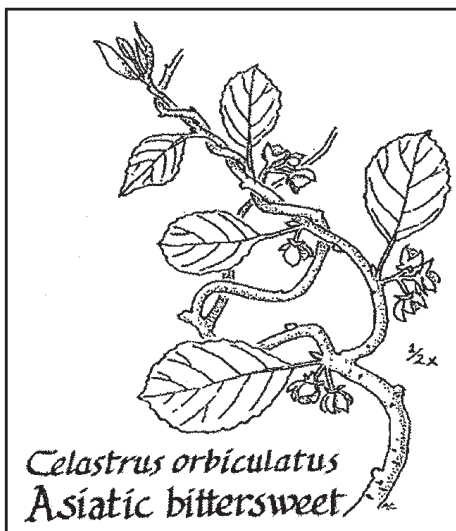
■ Traveling plants

Every plant is native to some part of the world. When a plant is moved to a new place outside of its natural range, it becomes an introduced species.

Throughout human history, intentional introductions of plants helped people survive in unfamiliar environments by providing food, medicine and other materials. We continue to introduce plants for landscaping, erosion control, to attract wildlife, and to provide commercially valuable products.

Plant introductions can also be unintentional. Seeds, roots and plant fragments may be transported by birds and animals, or may hitch a ride on export materials.

Some of these introduced plants can cause serious problems.



■ Too much of a good thing

When intentionally introducing a plant, we tend to select plant varieties that are hardy, adaptable and disease-resistant. This can prove to be too much of a good thing, for these are the very qualities that may give such varieties an advantage over native species. Additionally, when we introduce a plant to a new area it may lack natural predators to check its growth by eating its leaves, consuming its buds or infesting its bark.

Hardy plants in new locations with no natural enemies often have nothing to prevent them from spreading into natural areas. Once they have come to dominate or otherwise disrupt local native plant communities, they are considered “invasive”.

Big Problems

■ For nature...

Introduced plants can seriously affect native plants and animals. Diverse native plant communities can be displaced by a handful of invasive species, creating a biological desert. In turn, native animals that depend on native plant resources for food and shelter may be reduced.

■ For people...

Invasive plants often cause us great inconvenience. Gardeners know the trials of a plant run rampant. Invasive plants can also reduce agricultural crop yields and interfere with forest regeneration.

Recreation and commerce are affected in many water bodies by prolific aquatic invaders that foul boat engines and obstruct waterways. The cost of controlling these species is high, once they become established. When

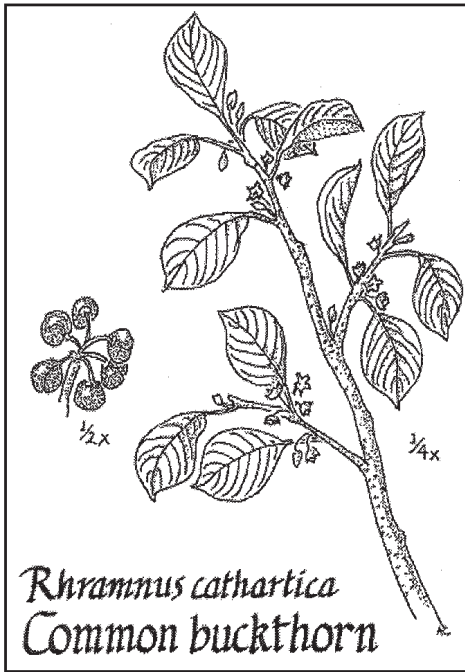


related animal species are affected by disruption to a waterbody, our enjoyment of activities like hunting, fishing and bird watching is reduced.

The Spread

Thousands of plants that have been introduced around the world, but only a small percentage have become invasive. Once a small population is established, however, an invasive species can spread quickly, and is very difficult to control.

Invasive plants tend to produce large amounts of seed, and can often regenerate from bits of plant material. Wind, water and animals may then transport seeds or plant fragments across great distances. Spreading roots may create uniform stands of a single species that crowd out native plants. Many invasive plants thrive readily in disturbed soils that result from construction of roads, homes and other buildings.



The Culprits

Certain plants are widely recognized as being invasive. multiflora rose and several varieties of Asiatic honeysuckle have spread throughout the East and Midwest. Glossy buckthorn and Japanese knotweed are at home in almost any habitat and are spreading widely in the Northeast. Asiatic bittersweet, an aggressive woody vine, is smothering native vegetation. Purple loosestrife and common reed (Phragmites) are taking over large areas of wetlands. Eurasian watermilfoil and water chestnut are causing extensive problems in aquatic environments.

Numerous other species are thought to pose threats, but their impact has not yet been documented. More information must be collected before everyone can agree on which species are desirable and which threaten our natural resources.

So What Can We Do?

■ **Stop the spread**

You can identify and remove invasive plants growing on your property. Conservation organizations often have information on various removal methods.

Remember that any area cleared of invasive species will be colonized by some plant. Be prepared to plant noninvasive species in disturbed soil.

You can help prevent the spread of aquatic invasives by cleaning your boat of all plant fragments after each use, and before putting it in any pond, lake or river.

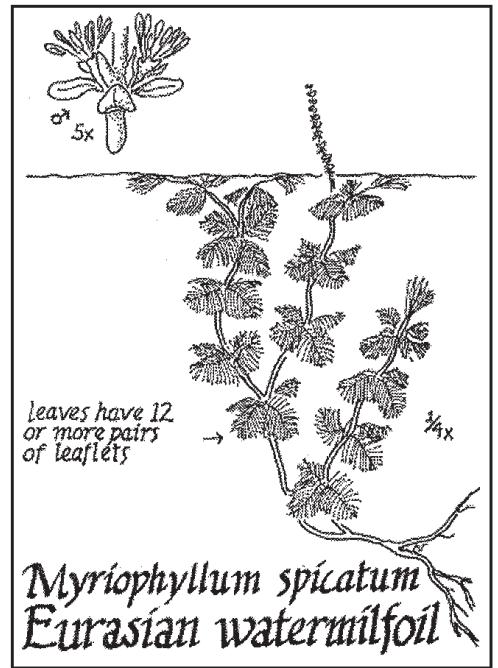
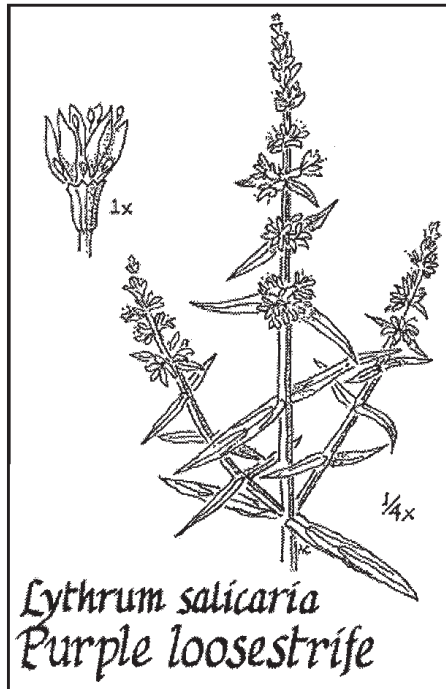
Never empty aquarium plants into any water body.

■ **Go Native**

Prevention is the best defense against invasive plants. Native plants are the safest landscaping alternative. Many nurseries carry native species and can provide assistance in selecting plants appropriate to specific needs and site conditions. Check the local library for literature on the many delightful native plant species in your local area.

If you decide to plant introduced species, choose those that are not invasive. Many conservation organizations will be happy to give advice.

Your actions may inspire your friends and neighbors to follow your lead!



Illustrations by Annie Chappell

For more information about invasive plants, contact:

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