



Understanding Invasive Plants: Lessons from Floracliff

Learn what to do after you identify invasive plants, find out why they're so bad and what you should choose instead from nature preserve manager Beverly James.

By Karri Sandino

Invasive Plants Prevention Checklist Avoid planting invasive plants Landscape with native plants Avoid using "wildflower" seed mixes Practice early detection and removal Minimize disturbance in natural areas Educate yourself and others Ask nurseries not to carry invasive plants Is your garden suffering from an invasion?

Could your property innocently be harboring one of Mother Nature's "most wanted?"

It may be—in the form of exotic invasive plants.

You've probably heard about these bad actors, but do you know:
How to identify them Why they're bad What to do when you find them

We got some tips during a recent visit with Beverly James (in photo), preserve manager with Floracliff Nature Sanctuary, a 287-acre nature preserve in the palisades region of the Kentucky River in central Kentucky.

Native Plants for the Garden
(especially in the South, East, Southeast)

Photos by Beverly James

Fire Pink

Spiderwort

Wild Geranium

Great Blue Lobelia
This one likes moisture and would be a good plant for a rain garden.

More Options

Virginia Creeper
A native vine that could be used as a groundcover or climber.

Fruit of the Eastern Wahoo
A great native alternative (and a close relative) to burning bush. TopAccording to James, invasives get their start innocently enough. Originally, the first U.S. residents and immigrants bringing culinary plants and other vegetation with them as they settled the states. Birds and foraging animals that eat the seeds and transplant them elsewhere. Ignorance of consumers, retailers and gardeners perpetuates the problem.

Over time, the invasives started to feel at home.



How to Identify Invasives

Unfortunately, many popular, easy-to-grow ornamental plants are often invasive.

"In fact, if you see a plant all over the place it's probably an invasive," James says.

But if you're baffled by the difference between bush honeysuckle (invasive) and spice bush (native), technology comes to the rescue: Just snap a digital photo and send it to an expert!

James recommends you send your photo to: Local cooperative extension agent Local nursery or local nature preserve that specializes in native plants State Department of Natural Resources National Association Exotic Pest Plant Councils (find your region!)

You also can learn to identify invasives: One resource is the United States National Arboretum website.

Some of the most invasive plants Floracliff staff work to eradicate, ironically, are some of the most popular ornamentals in the region: Burning bush Bush honeysuckle Chinese yam English ivy Japanese honeysuckle Multiflora rose Privet Wintercreeper

Other invasives they tackle include garlic mustard and Japanese stilt grass.

Top

Why are Invasive Plants Bad?

If they look so pretty, why are they so bad?

"They might appear beautiful to look at," says James, "but they're all you're going to see!"

The trouble lies in the soil. If you don't stop them from growing and spreading, James says invasives start to affect: The health of forests and prairies The diversity of other vegetation and even... The survival of native pollinators

"Native plants tend to work with nature to enhance the health of the soil in a place – invasives, nonnative or genetically modified plants may result in unwanted outcomes," she says.

According to James, invasives greatly decrease biodiversity and are considered the number two threat to native ecosystems, second to habitat destruction.

When invasives dominate and take over native plant, they affect: Natural resource protection - Native vegetation helps stabilize soil and water resources. Forests help purify water and keep the streams cool for aquatic life. Native plants also act as a buffer against floods and droughts. Native plants are important in the formation of soil, as leaves fall and plants die. In areas where bush honeysuckle is invading forests, the leaf litter is greatly reduced.

Agriculture and our food sources: The majority of the world's population is fed on less than 20 domesticated plants. If these plants are wiped out, say good bye to some food sources.

Medicine - Over 40% of prescribed medicines in the United States contain chemicals originally from plants. Salicylic acid from willow trees was used to make aspirin and taxol, from the Pacific yew, has been used to fight cancerous tumors.

Intrinsic values. The native plants and animals found in these places add to their uniqueness and to the recognition of a place we also call home.

Top

What Should You Do When You Find Invasives

After you I.D. your invasive plants, what you do next is simple: Get rid of them! Be sure to monitor the area to make sure they stay under control. It takes persistence to avoid invasives. You want to find them and pull them out when they're young before they can establish themselves.

Plant native species. For help choosing a native variety, contact the same people who helped you identify the species. See the sidebar for some ideas.



Unpredictable Invasives

Some invasive plants are worse than others. Many invasive plants continue to be admired by gardeners who may not be aware of their weedy nature.

Some do not even become invasive until they are neglected for a long time. Invasive plants are not all equally invasive. Some only colonize small areas and do not do so aggressively.

Others may spread and come to dominate large areas in just a few years.

Source: United States National Arboretum

Top

Remember the numerous benefits of planting native species. They're better for: Local soil Native animals Native pollinators

Plus you'll have a beautiful and an instantly unique garden—because you won't be buying the mainstream "favorites."

James suggests, "If you enjoy butterflies or hummingbirds – grow a native plants garden just for your native pollinators. Or try a rain garden."

If you're real daring, you may even want to try eating them!

About the Author: Karri Sandino is associate web editor with Hobby Farms and Hobby Farm Home.

Top