

Uninvited Guests

Barbara Bravo, Master Gardener and Garden Coach

For the past few years, I've been very concerned about some vines that have been taking over the entrance to my driveway. Admittedly, at first, I thought to myself, "that looks rather pretty". It created a high arching canopy that framed the road. The pretty look didn't last very long. Within the next couple of years the charming fairytale took a turn for the worse, strangling the trees it was using as a ladder, killing them. Upon investigation I identified the vine as Oriental Bittersweet, a non-native invasive vine. The history of how and why this vine, that I never planted, was growing on my property goes back to the 1860's.

Cause and Effect

For centuries exotic plants have been imported to the US. Sometimes to be used as fodder for animals, erosion control and reforestation or for their ornamental value. Oriental Bittersweet among others is one of those exotic plants. In a conversation with James 'Spider' Barbour, a Field Biologist residing in Saugerties, NY, an expert on invasive species in the Hudson Valley, I asked why some of these non-indigenous plants run rampant while others do not. Spider explained that certain of these plants find favorable conditions and thrive. Additionally, "Forest fragmentation and human interference is probably the most influential factor regarding the success of invasive weeds." In an article entitled "Alternatives To Invasive Or Potentially Invasive Exotics", William Cullina formerly of the New England Wildflower Society, states "These invasive exotics have few if any natural predators to keep them in check, instead running rampant and displacing entire communities of native plants as well as the insects, fungi, birds, mammals, reptiles, bacteria, etc. that have come to depend on them."

You may have heard tales about the vine Kudzu, the scourge of the southeast. This is one of those vines originally grown for its ornamental value and then thought to be a good source of fodder for farm animals. It being neither, it has been reported by Cornell's Invasive Plants Program that Kudzu may have infested up to 7 million acres and has been found growing as far north as Pennsylvania.

In Our Own Backyard

The list of these invasive plants, once considered benign, is lengthy. In the Hudson Valley Japanese Knotweed, Japanese Stilt Grass and Garlic Mustard are of particular concern. Japanese Knotweed may be seen growing along roadsides throughout the northeast, Japanese Stilt Grass is on the rise encouraged by wet weather. Garlic Mustard, a European biennial herb, is especially problematic. One plant can produce thousands of seeds that remain viable in the soil for 5 years. In addition, as I discovered in reading Carolyn Summers' book, "Designing Gardens With Flora Of The American East", Garlic Mustard secretes toxic phytochemicals that kill off the essential fungi in the soil that may lead to a decline of our forests. Purple Loosestrife is another. Originally planted as an ornamental in gardens, this plant escaped cultivation and has spread to 40 states and Canada, heavily impacting wetlands. To make matters worse, it can still be found for sale in some garden centers.

What We Can Do?

As gardeners we are in a good position to take action. We need to educate ourselves to recognize these plants. Be vigilant. If you notice some unusual and robust growth, especially if you didn't plant it, identify the plant. Your local Cooperative Extension and websites such as <http://www.nps.gov/plants/alien/index.htm> can assist you to that end. If you find that it is an invasive non-native plant, before reaching for an herbicide, do some research to discover the best management and removal recommendations. When shopping for new plants for your garden or replacing something, select native indigenous trees, shrubs and perennials whenever possible. The New England Wildflower Society is an excellent resource for lists of alternative native plants that will flourish in our Hudson Valley gardens while supporting the local ecosystem.

Lastly, as gardeners we are enthralled by new introductions that we discover at the garden centers, be wary of them and do some homework before you purchase, you might get more than you bargained for.

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Recommended Resources for information and identification of invasive plants

- Good resources to learn about and identify these plants:
 - www.invasiveplants.net
 - <http://www.nps.gov/plants/alien/index.htm>
- CAROLYN SUMMERS “Designing Gardens with Flora of the American East” an excellent book that addresses the invasive species problem and solutions. Rutgers University Press
Available at Rutgers University Press and Amazon.com
- New England Wildflower Society www.newfs.org offers alternative plant choices for non-native species

A short list of invasive non-indigenous plants found in the Hudson Valley

Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii* and *B. vulgaris*)
Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*)
Japanese Honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*)
Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*)
Japanese Stilt Grass (*Microstegium vimineum*)
Japanese and Chinese Wisteria (*Wisteria floribunda* and *W. sinensis*)
Mile-a-minute vine (*Persicaria perfoliata*)
Oriental Bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*)

Porcelainberry (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*)
Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria* L.)
Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*)