

Silent Invaders

By: Mary Morrison

Did you know that what you plant in your yard today could be in your National Forest tomorrow? It is estimated that about 10 percent of introduced plants will escape from yards and lawns and that about 10 percent of those escaped plants will become invasive. Non-native, exotic plants are quietly displacing native plants found in parks, forests, and other wildlands. These non-native, invasive plants are considered a bigger threat to America's wild lands than even urban sprawl. This silent invasion of America's wildlands has accelerated in the last few years due to increased international trade and importation of exotic plants.

Why should you be concerned? These exotic pest plants are so invasive that they create monocultures that cover extensive areas, which in turn reduce diversity and wildlife habitat. This monoculture reduces the variety of plants available as food sources for wildlife. If the invasive plant fails to produce seed due to things such as drought, late frost, etc, then a food source is eliminated for many animals leading to higher than average death rates.

Native wildlife have adapted to native plants. These introduced, pest plants may create a void in nesting habitat, by eliminating native shrubs, grasses, and trees that wildlife have used in the past. Some animals have specialized in feeding on or using certain plants.

How did we get in this mess? Some invasive, pest plants were introduced intentionally, before we realized what would happen. Kudzu, also known as the Plant that Ate the South, was brought from China and introduced for erosion control. European settlers brought plants from their homeland to ease homesickness. Many invasive plants are valued as ornamentals and were planted in people's yards. While people admire the fragrant, creamy blossoms of honeysuckle, this foreigner came from Japan and has displaced the native Coral Honeysuckle with its red blossom. Some of these plants, such as Autumn Olive, were planted as wildlife food sources, but are now having a negative impact on wildlife food sources.

Seeds of some plants were accidental travelers brought over in dirt used as packing or ballast in ships. When the dirt was dumped, seeds were also released. It is believed that fire ants were also introduced this way as well as some soil pathogens that have wrecked havoc on native plants.

How do these exotic, invasive plants move from your yard to America's wildlands? They travel many different routes. Mowing equipment can accidentally spread plant material along roadsides. Birds and other wildlife eat seeds that spread from their droppings. Some seeds of these pest plants are wind-blown. Domestic animals can spread the seed too. Many wilderness areas now require that pack horses are fed "certified weed-free" hay and grain.

Control of these exotic pest plants usually requires the use of herbicides and a long-term commitment and outright determination. The invasive plant may continue to reappear. Seeds of *Serecia lespedeza* or Scotchbroom will persist in the soil for 20 years or more. Sometimes other invasives plants may be brought back in by wildlife or equipment moving from one location to another.

One of the greatest challenges facing public land managers are property lines. The invasive plants must be treated on both sides of the property line for control measures to be effective. Sometimes multiple land landowners must get involved. Currently, scientists are researching biological controls, such insects, but they are reluctant to introduce more exotic species for fear of creating a worse situation.

Who's responsible? Ultimately, we all are. Few laws exist to control movement of these exotic pest plants and many are imported or grown and sold in the United States. Unknowingly, you may plant an invasive, exotic plant in your yard. However, by making informed choices, you can make a difference in the future of America's parks, forests, and wildlands.

Where you can go for more information. There are various organizations that can help you learn which native plants to use and which non-native, invasive plants are being sold. Native plant societies in North and South Carolina can provide information on native plants to use in your yard. These organizations sponsor workshops, meetings, and plant rescues. See www.scnps.org or www.ncwildflower.org to learn more about native plant groups in your area.

The Southeast Exotic Pest Plant Council website has important information. Go to www.se-eppc.org to learn more about invasive plants in your area. There are links for the North Carolina and South Carolina chapters. Other websites with information on a variety of exotic, invasive plants and animals are www.invasive.org, www.fs.fed.us/invasivespecies, and www.invasivespecies.org

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