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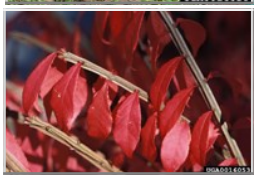
Space Invaders

By Bonnie Cummings, SMG Member

In the January Sunnyside Thymes introductory article about "Space Invaders", Marilee Burnside discussed why invasive, non-native plants are harmful to our ecosystems. So, you may ask, why do we continue to add them to our landscapes? Among the possible answers are that they are often beautiful, recommended to us by garden centers, and seem to be the perfect solution for a specific landscape need.



Burning bush

James H. Miller, USDA Forest

As a case in point, who has not admired the vibrant red fall color of the "Burning Bush"? Growing to a possible 20' x 20' and having interesting flattened stems, the deciduous shrub, Euonymous alatas (Winged Euonymous,) has been a landscape standby due to its ability to grow in most conditions, withstand severe pruning and its gorgeous fall color. It is still widely sold in the horticulture industry despite having been added to the Invasive Species List by the U.S.Department of Agriculture and banned in Massachusetts as long ago as 2009. The Burning Bush was introduced into the US from Asia around 1860 and has had 150 years to naturalize in our environment. Its ability to thrive in a wide range of soil types, hardiness zones (4 through 8), moisture and light conditions, has contributed to its widespread invasion into our vacant fields, road edges and forest clearings where it forms colonies and shoulders out native species. It is blessed with perfect flowers which can self pollinate or be pollinated by insects. It's prolific seeds may be spread by wind and birds. It has no significant pest or disease problems, hence no significant deterrents to its spread.

A relative of the burning bush, Purple Winter Creeper (Euonymous Fortunei), is touted as a useful ground cover and is widely sold in local garden centers and on-line. It, too, is in the USDA "Invasive Plant Atlas". If one goes on-line to the site, there is a map of the United States which prominently features Indiana where this species has been widely reported as invasive in nearly every county. It became popular because of its glossy green leaves in summer and being evergreen (ever purple!) in parts of the country where color in the winter garden is hard to get. While remaining less than a foot in height as it sprawls across the ground, upon encountering a vertical surface, the plant becomes a vine where it clings to walls and trees by way of aerial roots. It can climb to the top canopy of trees by clinging to the bark where it sucks moisture from its host and its density shades out other plants.

Bonnie's former driveway

Current neighbor's yard (photo: Bonnie)

In the winter of 1995 I bought a property in Southern Indiana which had 57 Burning Bushes lining one side of the drive and a significant patch of Purple Winter Creeper under a stand of River Birches on the opposite side. At first I loved them both until I discovered the Burning Bushes and Purple Winter Creeper were creating a tunnel through which I navigated my vehicle. Yikes! I could see this was going to be my life's work to keep them both under control. For 20 years I pruned the Burning Bushes in May, ensuring I cut deeply enough to remove the tiny blossoms, pulled up any errant plants that had sprouted at their bases, pulled Purple Winter Creeper away from the River Birches and ruthlessly "mowed" the ground cover 3 or 4 times each

Purple Winter Creeper

Michael Shephard, USDA

Continued

year to keep it from again becoming a vine and invading my trees. Would I do that again? Not in this lifetime!

Is there hope in the fight against these two invasive plants? Yes! Education is our first line of defense because stopping the planting of new specimens in our landscapes is key to stopping proliferation into natural areas. Second is removal of these specimens from our home landscapes where possible and replacing them with natives. While researching for this article I came upon a website, ecolandscaping.org and an article by Bruce Wenning which gives detailed control suggestions for Burning Bush, primary among them the use of Glyphosate after severe pruning.

References: Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder, Purdue Extension Entomology, Ecological Landscape Alliance, Early Detection & Distribution Mapping System (EDDMapS), USDA Invasive Plant Atlas.