
SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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"Helping Others Grow"

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Space Invaders - Autumn Olive & Russian Olive

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"Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall,
Which Is the Most Wicked Weed Of
All?"

My magic mirror (Google)
hasn't answered that question yet,
but Autumn olive has got to be
near the top of the list. Why?

This shrub grows in sand, loam, or clay-based soils. It can grow in light shade but prefers full sun. It is drought tolerant. It grows rapidly up to 20 feet. A single plant can produce up to 8 pounds of fleshy, juicy, red fruit, which birds love. Raccoons, skunks, and opossums like it too! Thus, wide seed dispersal. Its most distinguishable character is the silvery surface of the underside of the leaf. The top of the leaf is dark green. The silvery appearance comes from scales which are oddly shaped plant hairs (trichomes) and is characteristic of olive species. In April or May, fragrant little light-yellow flowers bloom then produce the fruit.

Elaeagnus umbellata, also known as Japanese Silverberry, is native to East Asia and was introduced to the U.S. in 1830. It was originally planted to provide food and cover for wildlife, as screens, windbreaks, and barriers along highways, to stabilize and revegetate road banks, and to reclaim mine spoil. For the first few years, it may seem contained, but then it suddenly becomes invasive and difficult to control. It continues to be planted as an ornamental shrub and for windbreaks. Autumn olive is an aggressive and competitive threat to native species and due to its large size, it interferes with natural succession by creating dense shade that prohibits native plants from growing. Its invasive nature far outweighs any useful qualities. It is now found across our State.



Photo: Purdue University

How to Control Autumn Olive? Burned, mowed, or cut plants will resprout vigorously. The most effective way to control this plant is with a combination of mechanical and chemical treatment. Use the cut-stump method in July through September, then apply a solution of 10% to 20% glyphosate directly on the cut stump to kill the root system.

Want to replace autumn olive? Plant these environmentally friendly native species: hawthorns, plums, ninebark, hazelnut, serviceberry and dogwoods.

A close relative to autumn olive is Russian olive, also considered an invasive plant. Russian olive is a shrub or tree with silvery leaves on both sides. *Elaeagnus angustifolia* can grow to 25 feet. Quite simply, Russian olive can out-compete native vegetation. It interferes with natural plant succession and nutrient cycling, and taxes water reserves. Planted in yards, it escapes into disturbed sites and idle ground where it spreads by seed or by root sprouts, often forming thickets.

In a nutshell, do not buy, sell, or plant autumn olive or Russian olive!

Thanks for reading this. Thanks for being a Sunnyside Master Gardener!

References:

- U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Invasive Species Information Center.
 - Missouri Department of Conservation, Invasive Species Coordinator, P.O. Box 180, Jefferson City, MO 65102
 - Plant & Pest Diagnostic Laboratory, Purdue University.
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