

INVASIVE PLANTS

IT PAYS TO BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU PLANT IN YOUR GARDEN. Invasive plants can quickly become a problem not just for you but for your neighbours too. So what exactly is an invasive plant? Invasive plants generally are defined as plants that are not native to a particular ecosystem, and whose introduction may cause harm to the environment. Plants native to a particular habitat or area co-exist with other plant and animal life in a balanced manner. They are kept in bounds by site factors such as soil type and climate, or pressures such as insects, diseases, and feeding by animals. Remove these plants to an area without these pressures, or with more ideal conditions, and they can begin to take over or become invasive.

By one estimate there are over 3,500 plant species not originally native to this country that have escaped cultivation into the wilds to become “naturalized.” Of these, about 1,000 are considered invasive, and about 700 are a serious threat to agriculture. Many of our attractive wildflowers are in fact non-native, and have become naturalized. Many more introduced plants haven’t escaped cultivation, including most of our food crops!

An example of a non-native plant that may or may not be invasive, in this case depending on climate, is the ornamental miscanthus or eulalia grass. This heat-loving plant doesn’t produce seeds in the colder northern areas so usually is not a problem here. The real cause for concern is when invasives take over natural areas, crowding out less adaptable or less vigorous native plants. In some cases threatened or endangered plants may be at risk. An example is the swallowwort vine (which we talked about at last month’s meeting). This plant is extremely invasive and threatens several thousand acres of plants, including 23 rare plant species, in the rare alvar habitats near Lake Ontario. It is also wreaking havoc at Ottawa’s Fletcher Wildlife Garden. Norway maple, burning bush, honeysuckle, buckthorn and barberry seeds are spread by birds to natural areas where they out-compete native plants, or shade them out in the case of the dense canopies of the Norway maple in forests.

A study on the invasive herbaceous garlic mustard showed this plant suppresses growth of canopy tree seedlings by disrupting their beneficial association with fungi in the soil. Also, garlic mustard destroys spring woodland wildflowers such as trillium and bloodroot by outcompeting with them for light, moisture, nutrients, soil and space. Along roadsides and in fields, attractive wildflowers may be overtaken by plants such as giant hogweed, swallowwort, and wild chervil. Beyond the beauty of native wildflowers is their function for pollinators, butterflies, and insects. These wildflowers feed the many beneficial insects that keep the ones we don’t want from getting out of control. Over 97 percent of insects are beneficial, or do no harm, or serve as food for birds.

One of the best known invasive plants is purple loosestrife (not to be confused with root-spreading loosestrife species). This is the attractive spiked purple flower seen in ditches and wetlands in late summer in masses. Purple loosestrife, compared to native wetland species such as cattails, is less desired by specialized wetland birds such as bitterns and black terns. These birds are declining in areas taken over by this invasive plant. Also it changes the nesting habitats for turtles, and the nutrients in water for those organisms fed on by fish and birds. Since purple loosestrife is native to Europe, it is there researchers went to find biological controls. After years of trials with insects (to make sure these introduced pests had no other effects on the environment) four have been introduced successfully and are helping to control purple loosestrife. You can find the whole story on this plant and these controls on the internet at www.invasiveplants.net.