

Increasing Your Knowledge about Invasive Plants “Key” to Proper Management

By Dan Balser

I had the rare opportunity to have lunch and visit with my high school biology teacher this week. Mr. Battles was a gifted teacher, and I actually took biology with him twice...and not because I did poorly the first time (I know many of you jumped to that conclusion immediately). He taught general biology, which we all probably took as freshmen in high school. He also taught senior biology, which was a science elective at our high school. I learned many things from his classes, but most of all, he helped me discover a love for biological science that grew through my college years and culminated in a career that I love. For that I say thank you, Mr. Battles!

Mr. Battles is also a tree farmer. He and his wife, Jane, own and operate Tower-n-Pines Tree Farm in Geauga County. It was a joy reminiscing about the high school years and then talking about the tree farm and how much it means to him. I remember one specific thing Mr. Battles taught us in class...how to use a dichotomous key to identify organisms. As young students, we were fond of what was referred to as “picture keying.” This was the process of looking through a guide book until you found a picture that resembled the organism in question. Picture keying didn’t cut it in Mr. Battle’s class. I’m glad I learned to use and appreciate keys for plant identification, and it is a skill that still serves me well today. As we talked about his farm and how difficult it is to control weed species, I was reminded about the number of invasive plants that have popped onto the scene during the past 30 years. Learning to identify these newly arriving plants is critical to knowing how to properly manage them.

Approximately 60 species of herbaceous and woody invasive plants have been identified in Ohio. These plants cause extensive economic damage and do immeasurable harm to our natural resources and the natural heritage of our state. The Ohio Division of Forestry is tackling the invasive plant problem on two fronts. We are providing stewardship-oriented assistance to private woodland owners in Ohio to help them control invasive plants on their properties. And we are helping Ohio communities address the issue of invasive plants in the urban forest.

ODNR Foresters can help landowners identify invasive plants in their woods and provide guidance on controlling them. Invasive Species Forester Annemarie Smith has been providing technical assistance to private woodland owners with invasive plant issues since the end of March 2009. Tree-of-heaven (*Ailanthus*) and the bush honeysuckle are two of the most harmful woody invasive plants that a landowner can have in the woods. The bush honeysuckles include three species: amur, morrow, and tartarian honeysuckle. These invasive plants have a negative impact on forest health, productivity, and wildlife habitat. In some cases landowners have called for assistance because they know they have a problem with one type of invasive plant like multiflora rose, which can be found on almost any rural property in the state. Upon inspection of the woodland it becomes clear that there are other woody invasive plants present that the landowner did not identify as invasive. Other woody invasive plants that might be encountered are autumn

olive, Japanese honeysuckle (a woody vine), glossy buckthorn, and paulownia. Interest in the program continues to be strong as many landowners want to improve the health of their woods.

Invasive plants also cause economic and environmental damage in communities. Naturalized areas in parks and along stream corridors are perfect places for invasive plants to become established. A survey of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes of community administrators with respect to invasive plants was recently conducted within a 22-county project area in southern Ohio. In all, about 50 administrators were interviewed as part of the survey.

The results of the survey revealed three main barriers to managing invasive problems in Ohio communities. The first barrier is that community administrators do not perceive invasive plants as a major concern. There are many things demanding the attention of community leaders, and invasive plants are not among them at the present time. The second barrier is related to the first. It is a lack of knowledge about invasive plants, how to identify them, and how to control them. Educational programs and technical assistance from ODNR Urban Foresters could help bridge this knowledge gap. The third barrier identified by the survey is a lack of financial resources available to properly address the problem. With budgets tightening everywhere, this will be a hurdle, but not an insurmountable one.

I believe that as community leaders learn more about the damage caused by the non-native plants invading their parks and properties, they will desire to control them and minimize their negative impacts on the community and the environment. I'm sure that Mr. Battles would warn communities and woodland owners not to get caught "shore-birding." This was a term he used to describe students who allowed others to do all the work during a group project. The message is simple – don't wait for others to act, control those invasive plants before they gain a strong foot-hold in your community or in your woodland.



Photo credit: James H. Miller, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org
Ailanthus leaves. Note gland dots on the underside of the leaves at the tips of the lobes.



Bush honeysuckle