

Invasive Plant Control - by Walter Koerber

What are invasive plants?

Invasive plants reproduce rapidly, spread over large areas of the landscape and have few, if any, natural controls, such as herbivores and diseases, to keep them in check. Many invasive plants share some important characteristics that allow them to grow out of control. These include: (1) spreading aggressively by runners or rhizomes; (2) producing large numbers of seeds that survive to germinate; and (3) dispersing seeds away from the parent plant through various means such as wind, water, wildlife and people.

How are invasive plants introduced?

People introduce exotic plants to new areas, on purpose and by accident, through a variety of means. Some species are introduced for use in gardening and landscaping, or for erosion control, forage and other purposes. For instance, in the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps planted kudzu vine (introduced from Japan), throughout the Southeast to help stabilize soil in erodible areas. Kudzu grew so prolifically that it was nicknamed the "vine that ate the South." Others come in unknowingly, on various imported products or in soil, water and other materials used for ship ballast. Many invasive aquatic plants are introduced by dumping unwanted aquarium plants into waterways. Once established in a new environment, some exotic species proliferate and expand over large areas, becoming invasive pests.

How do invasive plants spread?

Invasive plants spread by seed, vegetative growth (producing new plants from rhizomes, shoots, tubers etc.) or both. Seeds, roots and other plant fragments are often dispersed by wind, water and wildlife. Animals spread invasive plants by consuming fruits and depositing seeds as well as transporting seeds on their feet and fur. People also help spread invasive plants by carrying seeds and other plant parts on shoes, clothing and equipment and using contaminated fill dirt and mulch. Invasive aquatic plants are often spread when plant parts attach to boat anchors and propellers.

Why are invasive plants a problem in natural areas?

Like an invading army, invasive plants are taking over and degrading natural ecosystems. Invasive plants disrupt the intricate web of life for plants, animals and microorganisms and compete for limited natural resources. Invasive plants impact nature in many ways including growing and spreading rapidly over large areas, displacing native plants, including some very rare species, reducing food and shelter for native wildlife, eliminating host plants of native insects and competing for native plant pollinators. Some invasives spread so rapidly that they muscle out most other plants, changing a forest, meadow, or wetland into a landscape dominated by one species. Such "monocultures" (stands of a single plant species) have little ecological value and greatly reduce the natural biological diversity of an area.

Invasive plants also affect the type of recreational activities that we can enjoy in natural areas such as boating, bird watching, fishing and exploring. Some invasives become so thick that it is impossible to access waterways, forests and other areas. Once established, invasive plants require enormous amounts of time, labor and money to control or eliminate. Invasive species cost the United States an estimated \$34.7 billion each year in control efforts and agricultural losses.

What can I do?

Become familiar with invasive plant species in your area. When selecting plants for landscaping, avoid using known invasive species and those exotic species exhibiting invasive qualities. A few common ornamental plants that show invasive tendencies and that have become problematic elsewhere in the U.S. include: pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*); jubata grass (*Cortaderia jubata*); fountaingrass (*Pennisetum setaceum*); Chinese fountaingrass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*); star-of-Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum umbellatum*); creeping lilyturf (*Liriope spicatum*) and water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*). Ask for native plant alternatives at your nursery. Obtain a list of plants native to your state from your native plant society, state natural resources agency, or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Chesapeake Bay Field Office. Carry this list with you to nurseries to help with plant selection.

If you already have invasives planted on your property, consider removing them and replacing them with native species, such as those suggested in this guide. Refer to reputable resources for more information on identifying invasive plants and the best ways to control or remove a specific plant. When visiting a natural area, be alert for invasive species. If you see some, notify the agency or organization responsible for managing the land. Before you leave, avoid carrying "hitchhiking" plant material by taking time to brush seeds from clothing and shoes and remove plant material from boats, trailers and other items.

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To get involved, you can read about volunteers working with the [Invasives Strike Force](#) and search for other similar organizations.