

Oriental Bittersweet

by David Mark

Oriental bittersweet is a slow-motion disaster for the trees of New England. This ornamental plant “gone wild” was introduced to the U.S. in the mid 1800’s and widely naturalized by the early 1900’s. When fully grown it can overtop sixty foot tall trees, breaking branches with its weight, and finally, killing the trees.

Infestations of bittersweet are easiest to see in the winter, when the red berries are a colorful haze across bare treetops. In spring the berries are consumed by birds, contributing to the spread. Bittersweet likes full sunlight. It tends to grow fastest on trees bordering roads and open spaces. Growth rates are 5-10 feet/year. Stems up to an inch or so in diameter are smooth, with increasing roughness as mature stems thicken to 3 to 4 inches in diameter. These vines are easy to differentiate from other vines. Poison ivy clings to the bark of the trees with thousands of fuzzy rootlets and rarely exceeds 15-20 feet in height. Wild grape vines have flaky bark.

Combating bittersweet is both a private and public virtue. Property owners can begin by policing their own property. Vines should be cut as close to the ground as possible and also as high up as it is easy to reach. The gap makes it harder for the new shoots to reach the old vine ends and get back into the trees. In time, what is left up in the tree will rot and fall. For those who would complain that the vines will just grow back, so does grass – but you commit to cutting that twice a month. Hardware stores should have products that can be applied with a brush across the cut stems to block regrowth. Small vines can be pulled up roots and all. The roots are identified by a reddish-orange color.

Volunteer-minded individuals could approach the Conservation Commissions in their towns for guidance on addressing bittersweet problems. Much as there are organizations committed to cleaning the Sudbury, Assabet and Concord Rivers and picking up trash, towns need a coordinated effort to save the public woods. The Friends of the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge periodically schedule work events to combat invasive plant species in the Refuge.

Invasive species are noteworthy based on how much they disrupt the ecological balance of their new land. Various world lists of the one hundred worst invasive species are not limited to plants. Insects populate the lists, as do mollusks, crabs, birds, reptiles (Burmese pythons in Florida!), and even a smattering of mammals such as pigs, goats, cats and rats. Our international travels and trade continue to promote accidental or intentional introduction of species.

David Mark writes for Maynard's Beacon-Villager newspaper. His more recent columns are posted at www.maynardlifeoutdoors.com. Some of Mark's earlier columns were published in November 2011 as a book "MAYNARD: History and Life Outdoors."