

## Non-Native Invasive Plants

*By John Combs, St. James' Care for Creation Committee*

In our last essay we looked at Native Plants and their critical role in the environment. This essay will discuss one of the most significant threats to the survival of existing native plants which is the introduction of non-native invasive plants here in after referred to as NNI's.

Non-Native Invasive plants (NNI's) are plants that have been introduced to an area from other areas and ecosystems that are not native to our area. Many non-native plants present no problem for native plants because they are not invasive and therefore are tolerated. What we are concerned with are non-native plants that reproduce rapidly, spread over a large area, and have few if any natural controls to keep them in check and thereby present a threat to the survival of native plants. These NNI's can be aquatic plants, herbaceous perennials, shrubs, trees, or vines.

Many of these plants were intentionally introduced and then escaped and became an invasive problem plant. Such NNI's as Garlic Mustard and Oriental Bittersweet are examples of plants introduced intentionally. Many other NNI's entered accidentally through cargo operations at ports of entry or in packaging materials when items are shipped from overseas. Regardless of how they arrived if they are invasive, they need to be identified and controlled.

A principal concern to county residents is to know which NNI's are most important in our county. The Montgomery County Parks program maintains a website designed by the Weed Warrior Program that lists the NNI's of greatest concern in the county at: [www.weedwarrior.org](http://www.weedwarrior.org). This site contains the names and color-coded references which when clicked take you to detailed descriptions and photos. This is an excellent reference provided you know the name of the NNI of interest to you. I will cover other guide material later that is an appropriate way to identify a particular plant in question.

Our county has been a pioneer in developing strategies to combat NNI's. Carole Bergmann, a Montgomery Parks Countywide Forest Ecologist and Field Botanist, designed and implemented an innovative program to train and authorize individual citizen volunteers to help control NNI's in the county Parks. This program has been imitated by other jurisdictions around the Country and Ms. Bergmann has gotten widespread recognition for her innovative program. Since the program was initiated in 2003 over 98,000 hours of citizens volunteer time has been compiled removing NNI's in Montgomery County Parks and approximately 950 individuals trained as Weed Warriors.

The Montgomery County Parks Weed Warrior Program is described on their webpage at [www.weedwarrior.org](http://www.weedwarrior.org). They provide training session 7 or 8 times per year at various locations throughout the county. Attending one of these sessions is an excellent way to learn about invasive plants while performing a very worthwhile civic service and getting lots of exercise at the same time. If you do not want to commit to the program until you

know more about it, you could join one of many supervised NNI removal activities coordinated by the Weed Warrior Program and identified on their webpage.

Of particular concern are NNI vines that threaten the survival of our native trees that are so valuable in the natural landscape. In addition, there are a number of NNI's that spread rapidly and completely take over vast areas displacing many desirable native plants. Examples of some of the later NNI's are Mile-a-Minute vine and Lesser Celandine.

In order to control NNI's we must first be able to recognize them in our yards and/or at Garden Centers. Photo guides are available including: A National Park Service publication that has an online version at [www.maipc.org/PlantInvadersMidAtlanticNaturalAreas5thEdition.pdf](http://www.maipc.org/PlantInvadersMidAtlanticNaturalAreas5thEdition.pdf) This professional publication has detailed discussions of many of the topics I am covering in the short essay but with a great deal more specificity and detail with cited references in many cases. If any of the issues I have raised are of particular interest to you this would be a good source of further information.

A second valuable reference is The Maryland Invasive Species Council which puts out a monthly report called the "Invaders of the Month" which contains very valuable and timely articles about invasive issues: <http://mdinvasives.org/iotm/> . Looking at the past issues of this source will help you realize how great the challenges are to control invasive plants in our local ecosystem.

When you are visiting local plant nurseries or garden centers and you notice they are selling invasive plants you should let them know that you object to this practice. The Maryland Native Plant Society has a card which you may download at [www.mdflora.org](http://www.mdflora.org), that they suggest you give to such an establishment alerting them to the problem of introducing NNI's. If you discover as I did that many plants in your yard are not native plants you may want to consider replacing some of them with native plants. This is a valuable way of creating an environment that is more welcoming to native species of insects, animals and birds that depend on them.

Controlling NNI's plants requires real consistent effort since the NNI's rapidly reproduce, and dormant seeds may remain viable for several years. In many cases removing top growth will not kill the plant so that use of some herbicide is necessary to completely kill the plant. Where invasive plants are prevalent the local birds may have few other choices and eat the invasive seeds which leads to spreading them. Some NNI's like thistles can come back if even fairly small pieces of the root are left in the ground . This extreme persistence for many NNI's places a high value on the prevention of introduction in the first place.