

ON THE WILD SIDE

Taking On Oriental Bittersweet, a Formidable Opponent

Linda S. Kollett

Years ago our church held a fall fair with the theme of Bittersweet and Old Lace. I can remember traveling around the roads in Norton looking for bittersweet. It was hard to find. Not so anymore. Oriental Bittersweet, *Celastrus orbiculatus*, has firmly established itself in Norton. It is what is known as a non-native invasive plant.

Non-native means that it was introduced into the area. It probably arrived as part of attractive fall door wreaths or as an ornamental plant. Its importation was prohibited in 2006, but the vine/shrub is a determined guest.

While there are still questions about what it takes to be considered a native plant in this area, the Audubon Society suggests that it refers to any vegetation in the area prior to the arrival of the Europeans. The Federal Native Plant Committee defines native species as “one that occurs naturally in a particular region, state, ecosystem, and habitat without direct or indirect human actions.” (http://www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/PlantNativeSpecies.html)

The invasive part means that it grows rapidly, often displacing local vegetation. It can girdle and kill trees, and can cause extensive damage to woody plants as the vines become too heavy for the limbs to support.

The bright orange and red berries made a lovely arrangement, but unfortunately wherever the berries fall they release many seeds. The seeds are also widely distributed by birds, which love to eat the berries, and are particularly popular with starlings, blue jays and mockingbirds, all common birds in the Norton area. It also spreads through suckers growing up from the roots.



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Once it has established itself, it is hard to eliminate. Great places to read more about invasive species in Massachusetts is *A Guide to Invasive Plants in Massachusetts*, 2006. Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. And <http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/unitedstates/ma.shtml>.

I registered my yard as a National Wildlife Certified Wildlife Habitat several years ago. Most of the requirements were easily met. My current project is to try to reduce non-native perennials and eliminate as many invasive species on my property as I can. I have taken on the bittersweet.

I admit that I knew for a while that bittersweet was growing in the cedar trees along the edge of the field behind my house. Bittersweet loves edges and disturbed areas and it flourished. As I became more aware of the dangers of invasive plants I also realized that two trees were completely covered with the vine and were dying.

Suggestions to cut the vine from below (which might have worked earlier) would leave me with two dead trees covered with dead vines. I hired professionals to come in and remove the trees and vines, leaving a large sunny disturbed area full of bittersweet roots, seeds and suckers! I'll call this Step One.

Step Two. I pulled up as many shoots and roots as I could and hired my young friends David and Jonathan to continue the battle. Several times a week I pull up shoots, roots and small vines that are already trying to engulf the native, bird-attracting plants I had planted in the area. My neighbor Donald helped with a weed whacker. The shoots have to be cut down frequently to weaken the root systems that sustain them. This is an ongoing battle, and I know that bittersweet reinforcements are collecting on the open land behind my property.

Step Three is about to begin. I checked resources and found that many reliable sites, including <http://www.nps.gov/plants/alien/fact/ceor1.htm> suggest chemical controls if necessary as there are no known biological controls at this time. I will apply one of the suggested herbicides in the fall to minimize impact on native plants and wildlife. This may be one of those times where there has to be a judgment call between the dangers of allowing an invasive plant to do harm and the inadvisability of using chemical herbicides.

I enjoy my wildlife habitat and the challenge of converting it to an even more native environment for its inhabitants, and I encourage you to register your yard if you haven't done so already. Visit our web site www.nortonlandpreservation.org or go to the National Wildlife Federation website: www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx

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Oriental bittersweet can overrun natural vegetation. It can strangle shrubs and small trees, and weaken mature trees by girdling the trunk. Its growth in the crown of the tree makes the tree more susceptible to damage.