

Nature in the Neighborhood – June 2020

Invasion of the Invasive Species

When I was younger, I loved watching classic 1950s black & white sci-fi movies on TV. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was an all-time favorite. What was not to love? Creatures from outer space invading a small town and methodically replacing its residents with emotionless alien duplicates grown in giant seed pods.

Far-fetched? Well, maybe. A somewhat similar scenario is taking place right here in our own town, and in towns all through New England. These aliens may not be from outer space, but they are aliens and they are, in fact, taking over. To be precise, certain invasive plants are moving in and crowding out our woodland and wetland resident plant population.

What are invasive species?

As the *Native Plant Trust* explains it, “invasive plants are exotic species introduced into a new location by human activity.” But not all introduced species are considered invasive. “Invasives are distinguished by their ability to grow and reproduce quickly throughout a natural area, disrupting habitats and food sources for the native plants and the animals dependent upon them.” Like the “pod people” of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, these “pod plants” take over and slowly replace our native species.

Equally true, not all aggressive plants are invasive species. Weeds for example can reproduce quickly and aggressively take over an area to the frustration of gardeners but those weeds may be native plants. The key characteristic of an invasive plant is that it is not indigenous to the area.

Why are they considered bad?

Invasive species of plants and animals have a devastating impact on native species and can cause their decline or even extinction. Because invasive species can rapidly reproduce and out-compete native species for food, water and space, they are one of the main causes of global biodiversity loss – second only to direct habitat destruction.

Now, some of these invasive plants in our area can be enticingly appealing. Winged Euonymus (commonly called Burning Bush) has striking Autumn colors. Multiflora Rose sprouts Springtime masses of small white roses. Oriental Bittersweet has decorative orange and red Autumn berries. Purple Loosestrife, with its Summertime waving stalks of purple, is quite pretty. Don't be fooled! These can quickly take over an area, and in many instances are a hassle to remove. While birds may feed on these plants' berries, or bees pollinate their flowers, our native birds and pollinators don't have the evolutionary history to extract their full nutritional value – it's the equivalent of feeding junk food to them. Invasives offer neither a healthy food source or suitable habitat for our native species.

What can I do?

- **Start by learning more** about the native and invasive species in our neighborhood. The Swampscott Conservancy will be launching a series of short, informative videos to help you identify some of our most common invasives. These can be found online on our YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCC6texTfviyMIq6U40e6d2A>

For a larger list of invasives, visit:

<http://www.massnature.com/Plants/Invasives/invasiveplants.htm>

- **Plant native!** Help create demand. When you visit your local garden center ask them what native plants they have in stock and select these over non-natives. You'll be creating a backyard that is not only beautiful, but a healthy place for native species. (And don't fret if you see insects nibbling on your native plants that is part of what they are there for!)
- **Don't buy** or transplant invasive plants and, if you have invasive plants on your land, remove them. Common yard invasives seen around town include: Burning Bush, Scotch Broom, Garlic Mustard, Boston and English ivy, Common Barberry, Dame's Rocket, and Privet.
- **Report** sightings of invasive species on iNaturalist or via the Invasive Plant Atlas of New England (IPANE). IPANE aggregates data related to invasive species that can be shared with educators, land managers, and conservationists: <http://www.eddmaps.org/ipane/>

- **Volunteer** to help remove invasive species from natural areas. The Swampscott Conservancy just recently coordinated a volunteer effort to remove Japanese Knotweed at the entrance to Harold King Forest and hopes to plan additional such efforts in the future.

And don't forget to spread the word! As you learn more about natives and invasives in our neighborhood share what you know.