Managing Invasive Plants
Methods of Control

by Christopher Mattrick

They're out there. The problem of invasive plants is as close as your own backyard.

Maybe a favorite dogwood tree is struggling in the clutches of an Oriental bittersweet vine. Clawlike canes of multiflora rose are scratching at the side of your house. That handsome burning bush you planted few years ago has become a whole clump in practically no time … but what happened to the azalea that used to grow right next to it?

If you think controlling or managing invasive plants on your property is a daunting task, you're not alone. Though this topic is getting lots of attention from federal, state, and local government agencies, as well as the media, the basic question for most homeowners is simply, "How do I get rid of the invasive plants in my own landscape?" Fortunately, the best place to begin to tackle this complex issue is in our own backyards and on local conservation lands. We hope the information provided here will help you take back your yard. We won't kid you—there's some work involved, but the payoff in beauty, wildlife habitat, and peace of mind makes it all worthwhile.

PLAN OF ATTACK

Three broad categories cover most invasive plant control: mechanical, chemical, and biological. Mechanical control means physically removing plants from the environment through cutting or pulling. Chemical control uses herbicides to kill plants and inhibit regrowth. Techniques and chemicals used will vary depending on the species. Biological controls use plant diseases or insect predators, typically from the targeted species' home range. Several techniques may be effective in controlling a single species, but there is usually one preferred method—the one that is most resource efficient with minimal impact on non-target species and the environment.

Spraying chemicals to control invasive plants.

MECHANICAL CONTROL METHODS

Mechanical treatments are usually the first ones to look at when evaluating an invasive plant removal project. These procedures do not require special licensing or introduce chemicals into the environment. They do require permits in some situations, such as wetland zones. [See sidebar on page 23.] Mechanical removal is highly labor intensive and creates a significant amount of site disturbance, which can lead to rapid reinvasion if not handled properly.

Pulling and digging

Many herbaceous plants and some woody species (up to about one inch in diameter), if present in limited quantities, can be pulled out or dug up. It's important to remove as much of the root system as possible; even a small portion can restart the infestation. Pull plants by hand or use a digging fork, as shovels can shear off portions of the root system, allowing for regrowth. To remove larger woody stems (up to about three inches in diameter), use a Weed Wrench™, Root Jack, or Root Talon. These tools, available from several manufacturers, are designed to remove the aboveground portion of the plant as well as the entire root system. It's easiest to undertake this type of control in the spring or early summer when soils are moist and plants come out more easily.

Using tools to remove woody stems.

Volunteers hand pulling invasive plants.

Suffocation

Try suffocating small seedlings and herbaceous plants. Place double or triple layers of thick UV-stabilized plastic sheeting, either clear or black (personally I like clear), over the infestation and secure the plastic with stakes or weights. Make sure the plastic extends at least five feet past the edge of infestation on all sides. Leave the plastic in place for at least two years. This technique will kill everything beneath the plastic—invasive and non-invasive plants alike. Once the plastic is removed, sow a cover crop such as annual rye to prevent new invasions.

Cutting or mowing

This technique is best suited for locations you can visit and treat often. To be effective, you will need to mow or cut infested areas three or four times a year for up to five years. The goal is to interrupt the plant's ability to photosynthesize by removing as much leafy material as possible. Cut the plants at ground level and remove all resulting debris from the site. With this treatment, the infestation may actually appear to get worse at first, so you will need to be as persistent as the invasive plants themselves. Each time you cut the plants back, the root system gets slightly larger, but must also rely on its energy reserves to push up new growth. Eventually, you will exhaust these reserves and the plants will die. This may take many years, so you have to remain committed to this process once you start; otherwise the treatment can backfire, making the problem worse.

CHEMICAL CONTROL METHODS

Herbicides are among the most effective and resource-efficient tools to treat invasive species. Most of the commonly known invasive plants can be treated using only two herbicides—glyphosate (the active ingredient in Roundup™ and Rodeo™) and triclopyr (the active ingredient in Brush-B-Gone™ and Garlon™). Glyphosate is non-selective, meaning it kills everything it contacts. Triclopyr is selective and does not injure monocots (grasses, orchids, lilies, etc.). Please read labels and follow directions precisely for both environmental and personal safety. These are relatively benign herbicides, but improperly used they can still cause both short- and long-term health and environmental problems. Special aquatic formulations are required when working in wetland zones. You are required to have a state-issued pesticide applicator license when applying these chemicals on land you do not own. To learn more about the pesticide regulations in your state, visit or call your state's pesticide control division, usually part of the state's Department of Agriculture. In wetland areas, additional permits are usually required by the Wetlands Protection Act. [See sidebar on page 23.]

Foliar applications

When problems are on a small scale, this type of treatment is usually applied with a backpack sprayer or even a small handheld spray bottle. It is an excellent way to treat large monocultures of herbaceous plants, or to spot-treat individual plants that are difficult to remove mechanically, such as goutweed, swallowwort, or purple loosestrife. It is also an effective treatment for some woody species, such as Japanese barberry, multiflora rose, Japanese honeysuckle, and Oriental bittersweet that grow in dense masses or large numbers over many acres. The herbicide mixture should contain no more than five percent of the active ingredient, but it is important to follow the instructions on the product label. This treatment is most effective when the plants are actively growing, ideally when they are flowering or beginning to form fruit. It has been shown that plants are often more susceptible to this type of treatment if the existing stems are cut off and the regrowth is treated. This is especially true for Japanese knotweed. The target plants should be thoroughly wetted with the herbicide on a day when there is no rain in the forecast for the next 24 to 48 hours.

Cut stem treatments

There are several different types of cut stem treatments, but here we will review only the one most commonly used. All treatments of this type require a higher concentration of the active ingredient than is used in foliar applications. A 25 to 35 percent solution of the active ingredient should be used for cut stem treatments, but read and follow all label instructions. In most cases, the appropriate herbicide is glyphosate, except for Oriental bittersweet, on which triclopyr should be used. This treatment can be used on all woody stems, as well as phragmites and Japanese knotweed.

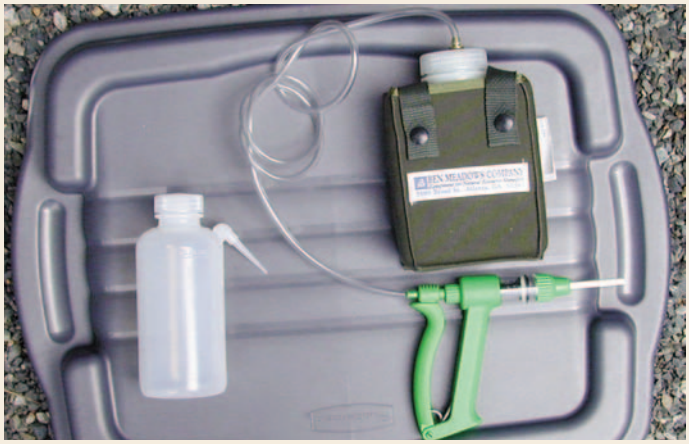
For woody stems, treatments are most effective when applied in the late summer and autumn—between late August and November. Stems should be cut close to the ground, but not so close that you will lose track of them. Apply herbicide directly to the cut surface as soon as possible after cutting. Delaying the application will reduce the effectiveness of the treatment. The herbicide can be applied with a sponge, paintbrush, or spray bottle.

Cut stem treatment tools.

For phragmites and Japanese knotweed, treatment is the same, but the timing and equipment are different. Plants should be treated anytime from mid-July through September, but the hottest, most humid days of the summer are best for this method. Cut the stems halfway between two leaf nodes at a comfortable height. Inject (or squirt) herbicide into the exposed hollow stem. All stems in an infestation should be treated. A wash bottle is the most effective application tool, but you can also use an eyedropper, spray bottle, or one of the recently developed high-tech injection systems.

It is helpful to mix a dye in with the herbicide solution. The dye will stain the treated surface and mark the areas that have been treated, preventing unnecessary reapplication. You can buy a specially formulated herbicide dye, or use food coloring or laundry dye.

There is not enough space in this article to describe all the possible ways to control invasive plants. You can find other treatments, along with more details on the above-described methods, and species-specific recommendations on The Nature Conservancy Web site (tncweeds.ucdavis.edu). An upcoming posting on the Invasive Plant Atlas of New England (www.ipane.org) and the New England Wild Flower Society (www.newfs.org) Web sites will also provide further details.



Hollow stem injection tools.

Biological controls—still on the horizon

Biological controls are moving into the forefront of control methodology, but currently the only widely available and applied biocontrol relates to purple loosestrife. More information on purple loosestrife and other biological control projects can be found at www.invasiveplants.net.

DISPOSAL OF INVASIVE PLANTS

Proper disposal of removed invasive plant material is critical to the control process. Leftover plant material can cause new infestations or reinfest the existing project area. There are many appropriate ways to dispose of invasive plant debris. I've listed them here in order of preference.

1. **Burn it**—Make a brush pile and burn the material following local safety regulations and restrictions, or haul it to your town's landfill and place it in their burn pile.

2. **Pile it**—Make a pile of the woody debris. This technique will provide shelter for wildlife as well.

3. **Compost it**—Place all your herbaceous invasive plant debris in a pile and process as compost. Watch the pile closely for resprouts and remove as necessary. Do not use the resulting compost in your garden. The pile is for invasive plants only.

Injecting herbicide into the hollow stem of phragmites.

4. **Dry it/cook it**—Place woody debris out on your driveway or any asphalt surface and let it dry out for a month. Place herbaceous material in a doubled-up black trash bag and let it cook in the sun for one month. At the end of the month, the material should be non-viable and you can dump it or dispose of it with the trash. The method assumes there is no viable seed mixed in with the removed material.

Care should be taken in the disposal of all invasive plants, but several species need extra attention. These are the ones that have the ability to sprout vigorously from plant fragments and should ideally be burned or dried prior to disposal: Oriental bittersweet, multiflora rose, Japanese honeysuckle, phragmites, and Japanese knotweed.

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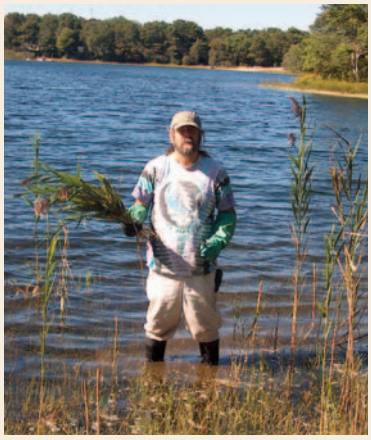

Controlling Invasive Plants in Wetlands

Special concerns; special precautions

Control of invasive plants in or around wetlands or bodies of water requires a unique set of considerations. Removal projects in wetland zones can be legal and effective if handled appropriately. In many cases, herbicides may be the least disruptive tools with which to remove invasive plants. You will need a state-issued pesticide license to apply herbicide on someone else's property, but all projects in wetland or aquatic systems fall under the jurisdiction of the Wetlands Protection Act and therefore require a permit. ***Yes, even hand-pulling that colony of glossy buckthorn plants from your own swampland requires a permit.*** Getting a permit for legal removal is fairly painless if you plan your project carefully.

1. Investigate and understand the required permits and learn how to obtain them. The entity charged with the enforcement of the Wetlands Protection Act varies from state to state. For more information in your state, contact:

   ME: Department of Environmental Protection
   www.state.me.us/dep/blwq/docstand/nrpapage.htm

   NH: Department of Environmental Services
   www.des.state.nh.us/wetlands/

   VT: Department of Environmental Conservation
   www.anr.state.vt.us/dec/waterq/permits/htm/pm_cud.htm

   MA: Consult your local town conservation commission

   RI: Department of Environmental Management
   www.dem.ri.gov/programs/benviron/water/permits/fresh/index.htm

   CT: Consult your local town Inland Wetland and Conservation Commission

2. Consult an individual or organization with experience in this area. Firsthand experience in conducting projects in wetland zones and navigating the permitting process is priceless. Most states have wetland scientist societies whose members are experienced in working in wetlands and navigating the regulations affecting them. A simple Web search will reveal the contact point for these societies. Additionally, most environmental consulting firms and some nonprofit organizations have skills in this area.

3. Develop a well-written and thorough project plan. You are more likely to be successful in obtaining a permit for your project if you submit a project plan along with your permit application. The plan should include the reasons for the project, your objectives in completing the project, how you plan to reach those objectives, and how you will monitor the outcome.

4. Ensure that the herbicides you plan to use are approved for aquatic use. Experts consider most herbicides harmful to water quality or aquatic organisms, but rate some formulations as safe for aquatic use. Do the research and select an approved herbicide, and then closely follow the instructions on the label.

5. If you are unsure—research, study, and most of all, ask for help. Follow the rules. The damage caused to aquatic systems by the use of an inappropriate herbicide or the misapplication of an appropriate herbicide not only damages the environment, but also may reduce public support for safe, well-planned projects.