

It's a Scary Time to Be a Weed

BY ANNE MARIE CHAKER

They come to hiking trails and abandoned lots armed with shovels, chain saws and souped-up farm equipment—all in the name of wrestling weeds.

Volunteers are reclaiming public parks and carving out nature trails in spaces overrun by innocent-sounding plants like Tree of Heaven, multiflora rose and purple loosestrife. Gardeners call these “invasives,” and the volunteer armies aim to clear them out. Most of the weeds are non-natives and may

have entered the U.S. as a seed, tucked inadvertently into cargo, or as a pretty garden addition—and have since made a mess. “When I was a kid, you could see straight through any woods. Today, you can’t. It’s just blocked” with weeds, says Marc Imlay, a retired biologist who volunteers from five to 40 hours a week clearing invasives from parks in the Washington D.C. area.

Portland, Ore., funds the “**No Ivy League**,” which organizes volunteer “work parties” on some Saturday mornings to remove English ivy in the Forest Park area. Recently, a singles group of

community volunteers in Washington D.C. pulled weeds in the Potomac River Gorge for the Nature Conservancy.

In Maryland’s Montgomery County, a “Weed Warrior” program trains volunteers to recognize invasives so they can get to work pulling them up in 400 county parks. Begun in 1999 with a handful of participants, the program now numbers 700 certified warriors, says forest ecologist Carole Bergmann, who runs it. Volunteers train with park officials before heading out, and they are encouraged to wear the group’s hat while in the field.

There are about 5,000 invasive plant species in the U.S. today smothering trees, trails and even waterways. Lacking the predators and pests of their native climates, these tough plants can run rampant in their adopted homes, often surviving and even thriving in poor soil and little water. As housing developments and other new infrastructure disturb landscapes and create clearings, the problem is getting worse, scientists say. Climate change has encouraged the kudzu vine, widely known as “the vine that ate the South,” to climb as far north as New England.

In 2004, neighbors in Cheverly, Md., became interested in a five-acre stretch of woods running alongside a nearby creek. “Nobody ever used them because they couldn’t get through the junk to see these beautiful trees and streams and pond,” says Cathy Smith, a freelance writer. Invasives including Chinese wisteria and Japanese stilt grass, plus trash that had snuck in from a busy highway, were overrunning the native plants.

That fall, Ms. Smith and her husband put a notice in the town newsletter asking neighbors to help them clear weeds and build a trail. To their surprise, about 15 people showed up on a Saturday morning. “It was a whole lot of people we would have never met before, but who were all interested in having a

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Melissa Golden for The Wall Street Journal

Mike Callahan, mayor of Cheverly, Md., wrestles a multiflora rose with a weed wrench.

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place to take their kids and walk the dog," says Ms. Smith. "People brought weed whackers, chain saws, and we hacked our way through very dense, overgrown woods."

Today, a regular weed-clearing takes place on the last Saturday of every month. The group calls themselves Friends of Lower Beaverdam Creek. Ms. Smith says, and brings plenty of coffee. Now, the trail is almost a mile long and growing. Home-made markers point to native trees such as paw-paws and birches that once were choked. Volunteers have noticed a return of birds and butterflies.

"It's really become part of our community," says Mike Callahan, Cheverly's mayor, of the woods. "They did this on their own. The only thing the town ever provided them was space in our newsletter." Because of the patchwork of town and county ownerships in the woods, plus the local utility company's right-of-way in certain sections, volunteers were probably the only ones who could have got the job done so quickly. "The town would have been paralyzed by the process," the mayor says.

The difference between a "weed" and a flower is, of course, often in the eye of the beholder. There are native species—black-eyed susans, for example—that might aggressively "naturalize," seeding and spreading if left to their own devices, and some gardeners might start to think of these plants as weeds. But volunteers concentrate on non-natives because of their persistence: They will completely overpower less-competitive species if not kept in check.

Aggressive weeds threaten to muscle out some native species that provide food and habitat for birds and other fauna. In Western states, invasive cheatgrass contributes to grassland fires that destroy sagebrush, an important food source for the Greater Sage-Grouse, a large native bird whose numbers are dwindling. "We're talking about a total transformation of an ecosystem," says Richard Mack, ecology professor at Washington

State University, Pullman.

The economic impact of invasive plants—from removal efforts to agricultural losses—totals about \$34 billion a year, says David Pimentel, Cornell University professor of ecology and agriculture.

A handful of residents in Spartanburg, S.C., got together in 2004 to fight kudzu. "In the first years, our No. 1 obstacle was that folks had accepted kudzu as being inevitable and unstoppable," says Newt Hardie, the group's 75-year-old co-founder. Now, the Kudzu Coalition has about a dozen regulars, many of them retired scientists, engineers and machinists. The group assesses sites, clears them alone or with other groups and helps other neighborhoods start weed-wrangling efforts.

Signs around Spartanburg identify areas where the coalition has made its mark. Group members helped a colleague re-rig his skid-steer loader to handle the oceans of aggressive vines. Paul David Blakeley, the owner, carved a Mohawk haircut out of red wood, affixed it to the hood and emblazoned the machine with the name "Kudzilla."

The coalition has made an impression beyond that of just another well-meaning group. James H. Miller, research ecologist at the U.S. Agriculture Department's **Forest Service** in Auburn, Ala., says he once thought kudzu could be eradicated only by completely removing the root system. To his surprise, the Spartanburg group reported success by attacking the "crown," where roots and plant-tops come together, making removal less laborious.

That method "is in my recommendations now and being used by teams in national forests treating sensitive areas," Dr. Miller says.



Garden Invaders

Here are some common invasive plants, and ideas on what gardeners can do about them.

English Ivy (Hedera helix)

Origins: An evergreen vine found on the ground or climbing up trees and fences. Probably introduced to the U.S. by European immigrants.

Location:

Commonly invasive on the East and West coasts.

Removal Tips: Remove by hand-pulling or with a lawn mower or weed whacker. Broken stems grow new roots.

Cheatgrass (Bromus tectorum)

Origins: A weedy grass with drooping tips. It probably arrived from Eurasia in contaminated grain.

Location: Highly flammable, it is a major cause of grassland fires in Western states.

Removal Tips:

Can be hand-pulled but large areas may require herbicides.

Kudzu (Pueraria lobata)

Origins: The vine, native to Asia, has dark leaves and fragrant purple flowers.

Location: Notorious in the Southeast for how quickly it blankets an area, killing vegetation underneath.

Removal Tips: Get rid of the 'crown'—the knobby connection of roots to plant tops.

Purple loosestrife (Lythrum salicaria)

Origins: Native of Eurasia, it shoots up a magenta-colored flower spike in summer.

Location: Present in every state except Florida. Multiplies fast; threatens some federally endangered plants.

Removal Tips: Hand-pull or spot treat with herbicide.

Multiflora rose (Rosa multiflora)

Origins: Thorny shrub, introduced from Japan in 1866. Produces clusters of white flowers in early summer.

Location: Present in much of the U.S., especially in woody areas. Forms dense thickets that choke out native plants.

Removal Tips: Cutting or mowing at the rate of three-to-six times per growing season, for two to four years, has been shown to be effective.

Note: Consult your local university extension service before resorting to herbicides. Source: Wall Street Journal reporting, Plant Conservation Alliance, Washington D.C. (<http://www.nps.gov/plants/alien/>)



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ONLINE TODAY: See photos of eradication efforts and a video about 'Kudzilla' at WSJ.com.