

Invasive Plants: This is OUR Problem, Too[®]

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INTRODUCTION

Within the last decade most of us have become aware that the issue of invasive species has become important for the nursery industry. In retrospect, it appears the nursery industry has responded appropriately and remarkably quickly to the invasive plant issue. But the real game has only just begun.

Because our industry affects the market availability of invasive plants, much of the focus is on us. We have the honor of being the major target for regulation and legislation.

BACKGROUND

As we explore the threats and opportunities, it is important to agree upon several fundamental principles. The invasive plant issue is real, particularly in the minds of influential segments of the public. Ignoring it works against us. The public generally perceives us as ethical, doing good things with our resources, and having among the best reputation of any for-profit industry. We share an obligation to each other to act responsibly. In most situations, we did not cause the problems unilaterally. Most effective solutions will result when we remove all “blame” connotations from both our own thinking and the development of solutions. All discussions must focus on facts. Removing anecdotal information and emotions will result in the most credible outcomes.

Several other basics also need to be established. “Invasive Plants” and “Native Plants” are each a different issue. These cannot be considered opposites or as components of the same discussions if we are to achieve effective solutions. There is also a difference between those plants already here and those that have not yet arrived. We need to apply different approaches to each of these groups. My discussion will focus only on plants already in commerce.

Virtually all parties in the discussions about managing invasive plants agree — maintaining **diversity** within plant communities is the fundamental concern. Those who consider themselves environmentalists are particularly concerned with assuring survival of the diversity within natural plant communities. Many nursery professionals view offering choices of new plants to customers a cornerstone of their marketing programs, and a chief source of revenues. The discussion surrounding invasives focuses on the threat of certain species becoming dominant and reducing diversity.

DISCUSSION

To effectively manage invasive plants it will be important to establish reliable information about them and then use the information properly. Credible base information about invasive plants must be the result of testing them against agreed-upon criteria. Concurrence among all parties on the validity of the process is critical. To make the process reasonably accomplishable, only species invasiveness is considered. Should cultivars differ, the same criteria apply.

Resolving issues of regionality must also be part of this process. *Berberis thunbergii* may act like an invasive threat in the Berkshires (Massachusetts), but it is

rare to find a volunteer plant around our Hopkinton nursery where we've grown cultivars and the species since the 1940s, more than 60 years.

Once species invasiveness has been tested and agreed upon, consensus must be reached on what management of invasive plants is expected to achieve — what are we managing FOR. The value of each invasive plant needs to be considered in relation to its threat. Economic, social, environmental, and personal implications must be weighed against the benefits of exterminating the plant. For example, does it make sense to entirely remove Norway maple from the marketplace when it provides so much value to city landscapes? Japanese barberry is one of the few deer-proof plants available; does the benefit from its elimination outweigh its value for homeowners in deer infested neighborhoods?

Physiological characteristics for each species differ and need evaluating. An evaluation strategy and timeframe needs to be established for each species and each region to achieve meaningful results. To do all this effectively will be a major undertaking and require significant financial and personal investment, or else the results will disappoint.

Already in some areas the nursery industry is being asked to remove from commerce a number of plants deemed invasive. This is certainly shortsighted if the result we seek is truly to solve the problem of these species invading natural areas. Over the last two decades most nurseries have voluntarily removed obvious thugs like *Celastrus orbiculatus* (Oriental bittersweet), *Lythrum salicaria* (purple loosestrife), and *Rosa multiflora* from production. But lacking effective education and eradication efforts, these species continue to proliferate in the wild. The sole apparent effect has been loss of revenue, albeit minimal, for those responsible businesses. Why would the result be any different with removal from commerce of plants that are major income producers like *B. thunbergii* 'Atropurpurea Nana' (syn. 'Crimson Pygmy'), *Euonymus alatus* 'Compactus', and *Acer platanoides* 'Crimson King'?

ROLE OF THE NURSERY INDUSTRY

If an outcome reasonable to all is expected, all knowledgeable stakeholders must participate in the process. A number of decisions concerning invasive plants have already been made without input from the nursery segment, and these will certainly hinder achieving optimally, or perhaps even minimally successful results. Should we choose not to be part of the process, we suffer the consequences. Many of the decisions yet to be made will affect the way we operate our future businesses, and it is vital that we participate in determining outcomes.

Education is the fundamental need. All who are involved in our businesses and classrooms must become aware of the issues, ask appropriate questions, and understand how our individual and group interests are affected. This helps determine how to realistically focus on the right actions to take. Although some points of view will certainly differ from ours, we need to search for common needs, look for opportunities, and avoid unnecessary defensiveness.

Our customers and those we serve must learn, probably from our sales people, about what to look for, how to react, and choose reasonable alternatives. When our customers understand the potential harm certain species may create they can make considered choices how to react and what alternative actions are appropriate.

Legislators and regulators need to understand the facts about invasive species, and their effects. Without question some of the information being distributed is

emotionally colored and anecdotal. If the facts are to be made clear, it is essential to provide scientifically valid information from credible sources.

Perhaps most importantly, “idea brokers” in the press, television, and radio reporters, garden communicators, plant societies, environmental groups, and others who interact with the public to form opinions all need to have the right information.

Research also plays a major role. Some obvious questions need answers. For example, what is the expected natural course of evolution for each species if nothing is done to control it? Developing sterile cultivars and enhancing within non-invasive species the favorable characteristics of invasives are possible. The nursery industry has already begun this process through the American Nursery and Landscape Association’s Horticultural Research Institute (HRI) grants funded by the nursery industry, and various projects at universities and botanic gardens. When non-invasive cultivars that are virtually identical become commonly available, market forces will reign.

The burden of funding and accomplishing these research and education efforts need not fall solely upon the nursery industry. This role is certainly an appropriate endeavor for the groups who have identified the problems and are well equipped to marshal the resources to fulfill this need. Developing and enhancing relationships and liaisons among all stakeholders will obviously benefit a productive outcome. Some of this has already been started (go to <www.mobot.org/invasives> for an important example).

CONCLUSION

The nursery industry is becoming the primary focus of the invasive plant movement. It is prudent for all of us to understand this issue, ask the tough questions, assess the answers for credibility, and communicate effectively what we know so the implications are well understood. Along with this, doesn’t it make sense to become as proactive as those who have brought this issue to our attention? Let’s help assure the results we all desire can be achieved by insisting upon appropriate roles and accountabilities for all parties to effectively participate in the solutions!