Invasive plants reflect local history but damage area

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The history of Ontonagon County is all around us. It's evident in our barns, mines and the staggeringly large logs that rest in our rivers. We can also see Ontonagon's history in some of the invasive plant species found growing here.

Japanese knotweed, exotic honeysuckles and Japanese barberry are all invasive plants that were introduced into the United States in the mid-to-late 1800s, just as the earliest residents of Ontonagon County were experiencing the mining and logging booms that took place at that time. Those residents built homesteads and landscaped them with edible, medicinal and ornamental plants. Though many of the buildings have long since collapsed, the plants are still here as reminders.

Some of the plants that were introduced, such as apple trees, fit in well with the environment of Ontonagon County without overpowering our native plants. Apples even provide a valuable food source for local people and animals.

Others, such as knotweed, honeysuckle and barberry, do not. These three plants, which were originally introduced as ornamentals, have limited use as food or habitat for wildlife, and displace valuable native vegetation.

Japanese knotweed and its relative giant knotweed are aggressive plants which spread primarily through rhizomes. The dense stands they create do not provide food or habitat for local wildlife and they are very difficult to eradicate. They create a serious problem for landowners who wish to grow something other than knotweed.

Fall is the most effective time to treat knotweed, which should be cut back, removed from the area and disposed of. Disposal is important, because debris can re-root, further spreading the infestation.

Immediately after cutting, knotweed can be treated with herbicides. Those containing the chemical 2 4-D are most effective. It will take several years of treatment to completely eradicate an infestation.

Submitted photos

Invasive plants in Ontonagon County like Japanese barberry, left, and exotic honeysuckles, right, can cause problems for landowners and wildlife.

Exotic honeysuckles, a group which includes several ornamental shrubs, are a common sight near homes and along fence lines in Ontonagon County. It is also common to see birds feasting on the berries of these shrubs. Unfortunately, those birds are neither as healthy, nor as safe, as birds that eat the fruits of native plants such as hawthorns.

A study conducted at the Morton Arboretum in Chicago found that birds nesting in honeysuckles suffered much greater predation than those nesting in native shrubs. Additionally, birds that feed on high-sugar, low-protein honeysuckle fruits are less likely to survive the winter than those that eat native fruits.

Eating honeysuckle can even alter the appearance of some birds. Studies in Ithaca, N.Y., found that yellow-tailed waxwings fed honeysuckle berries developed orange tails rather than yellow. The effect that this may have on mate selection, which is highly dependent on coloring, is unknown.

As with knotweed, honeysuckle infestations can be treated in the fall. Cut back the plants to just above ground level and remove and discard debris, especially if they contain ripe berries which could re-seed. The cut stumps can be treated with a glyphosphate-containing herbicide to help prevent regrowth.

Japanese barberry is as commonly used in modern landscaping in Ontonagon County as it was 150 years ago. This is unfortunate, because barberry readily spreads to our forests, where it grows into dense thorny thickets, displacing native plants.

Research done at Rutgers University demonstrated that the these thickets of barberry actually change the chemistry of the soil in which they are growing by, among other things, increasing the acidity. These changes mean that the soil is less hospitable for native plants, even after the barberry is removed. Much of the economic activity in Ontonagon County, including logging and tourism, relies on our healthy forests.

Barberry can also be treated in the fall, in the same manner as honeysuckles.

Though some invasive plants echo our history, residents of Ontonagon County should look to our future and do what we can to remove these threats to the vibrant wildlife that surrounds us. If you have any questions regarding these three plants or any other invasive plant species in Ontonagon County, email us at wintergreenfarm@live.com.