

Coping with Invasive Plants

by Scott Aker



WEEDS ARE inevitable when you garden, but invasive ones take things to a whole different level. These tend to be species introduced from elsewhere that thrive a little too well in their new environment, crowding out other plants and even causing damage to homes. If you are confronted with such a plant, it often requires multiple tactics to keep it from overwhelming your garden—or worse, escaping into natural areas.

WHEN GOOD PLANTS GO BAD

It shouldn't surprise you that some of our worst invasive species were planted on purpose before they got out of hand. Multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*) was introduced as a hedging plant for grazing land and buffer against soil erosion. Kudzu (*Pueraria montana* var. *lobata*) was planted to check erosion and feed cattle. Other invasive species are being sold as landscape plants.

Part of the challenge is that a plant's invasiveness tends to be highly regional—it may only be a problem in specific soil types, moisture regimes, or climates. For that reason, it's always a good idea to check with your state's department of agriculture or Cooperative Extension service about problem plants in your region before you shop, particularly if you are buying plants online.

Even then, some plants might be invasive in your conditions but have yet to make it on a list. I have a running battle in my own Maryland garden against spotted bellflower (*Campanula punctata*) that I planted many years ago. It wasn't on my state's invasive list and still isn't, but it is definitely on my personal list of banned plants. For this reason, I recommend that if you are planting something that is new

Growing rampant throughout the South, kudzu has overtaken this field and abandoned house.

to gardens in your area, try to isolate it for its first year so you can see if it tries to spread aggressively.

TO SMOTHER OR SPRAY?

In addition to potentially harming the environment or plants you do want to grow, spraying herbicides may not always be an effective solution. Some invasive plants, such as Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) and English ivy (*Hedera helix*), are resistant to herbicide treatment and may be better controlled by covering them with black plastic or cardboard weighted down with mulch or stones. Be sure to block all light from reaching the leaves for an entire season. This approach can work especially well in perennial beds because you can move the perennials to a nursery area in the fall or early spring, then cover the bed. Once all invasive plants are dead, you can replant the perennials.

In some situations, herbicides may be the most practical way to go. In my own garden, Japanese stiltgrass (*Microstegium vimineum*) has spread very quickly, and it is impossible to pull it all up by hand. Because it is annual, successive years of treatment with the same kind of pre-emergent herbicide used for crabgrass control will be effective in eradicating it completely. If you are also dealing with invasive grasses among desirable plants, look for a selective grass herbicide containing fluazifop or sethoxydim; it will not harm broadleaf plants. When using a non-selective herbicide such as glyphosate, use a sponge or paintbrush reserved solely for this purpose to dab it on weed foliage to minimize the risk of harming nearby plants.

Another situation that I would consider using herbicide rather than attempting to dig or hand-pull is when you are dealing with invasive shrubs, trees, and woody vines. The amount of herbicide needed to kill these plants is very small, and there is little chance of impacting non-target plants that are growing close by. Digging and pulling always disturb the soil, bringing buried weed seeds to the surface, resulting in a robust new crop of the plants you are trying to get rid of. You also risk damaging the roots of nearby trees and shrubs you are trying to protect.



Cut weed trees and shrubs close to the ground before painting the stumps with an herbicide.

Gardening Q&A with Scott Aker

FIXING POOR SOIL

We started a little garden this spring, and so far we have harvested a few radishes and some lettuce, but everything else looks light green and isn't growing too fast. Our soil isn't very good, so we mixed in a few bags of garden soil and have added fertilizer a couple of times. Crabgrass and clover are growing well, but our veggies are a bust. What can we do?

Get the soil tested. The weeds you mention tolerate acidic soil, and most vegetables don't. Very low pH limits the chemical availability of nitrogen, so even if you add it, it may not benefit your veggies. I wouldn't be surprised if you end up adding 100 pounds or more of lime to bring the pH into a more productive range. This should be done right before you till the soil.

UNPALATABLE DANDELION GREENS

I've enjoyed eating dandelion greens from the grocery store, so I tried eating leaves from dandelions growing around my yard, but they were very bitter and tough. What can I do to make my "homegrown" ones taste better?

Dandelion varieties found in the produce section have more tender leaves and lack much of the bitter latex found in the wild garden dandelions. Their leaves are usually blanched by tying the outer leaves up to shade the inner leaves so they become more tender and less bitter. If you really want to grow dandelions to eat, some seed companies—such as Johnny's Selected Seeds—offer them. —S.A.

Send your gardening questions to Scott Aker at saker@ahsgardening.org (please include your city and state with submissions).

In order to use the smallest amount of herbicide necessary, cut the plant to the ground and treat the cut stump with a product containing triclopyr. Use a

paintbrush reserved solely for this purpose to apply the herbicide to the cut surface of the stump, where it will be translocated into the roots. Check for sprouts after treatment to confirm the plants are completely dead.

BIOLOGICAL CONTROL

Beneficial insects and diseases that attack invaders have been the focus of long-term research to combat entrenched invasive plants. Insects have been imported to successfully combat invading plants such as purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and saltcedar (*Tamarix* spp.). Biological control never completely eliminates a problem plant—the invader is maintained at a low population density that is less likely to cause ecological damage. If you are interested in biological control on your own property, contact your state's department of agriculture to find out if natural enemies are available for release on your property.

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