

Invasive Exotic Plants to Avoid

I recently sat through a presentation on invasive non-native plants and was amazed by how many people in the audience were unaware that some of these plants were non-natives and were in fact invasive.

The problem with exotic plants is that some of them can become invasive, and whatever kept their populations in check in their native country is absent here so they can become invasive and choke out native plants. To make it worse, our native insects and animals that evolved to be here with our native plants do not use the exotics they did not evolve with, so the exotics do not fill the same ecological function that the displaced natives did.

E.O. Wilson has said, "Exotics are the second cause of species extinction, behind only habitat destruction, worldwide."

Here are some of the most common exotic trees and shrubs in our area: ligustrum (aka Chinese privet or glossy privet), Chinaberrytree, Chinese tallow, Chinese pastiche, tree-of-heaven, vitex (sometimes marketed as 'Texas lilac') mimosa or silk tree (not to be confused with our native fragrant mimosa), and nandina (aka sacred bamboo).

The most common exotic vines include Japanese honeysuckle and English ivy.

There have been many exotic grasses brought into this country, usually with the belief that they possessed some beneficial property (usually increased amounts of forage production), but these grasses have obviously escaped the properties in which they were introduced and spread widely. These include Bermudagrass, Johnsongrass, Willman lovegrass, buffelgrass, Guinea grass, and Kleingrass. Two special grasses include bamboo, and one of the worst invasive introduced species, Arundo donax or giant reed. The latter is taking over riparian waterways and choking out native riparian vegetation.

Two aquatic plants, water hyacinth and giant salvinia are really troubling on lakes just east of here and they are moving in this direction. Also along lakesides are elephant ears that have escaped peoples' yards and moved downstream

Some introduced forbs that can be especially troubling, including several thistles, specifically: musk thistle, bull thistle, sow thistle, and Malta star thistle, as well as bastard cabbage and Brazilian vervain.

And finally, there are some non-native forbs that were not introduced into this country from a foreign land but are altered native plants, hybrids or cultivars. The two most troubling plants in this category are "new gold" lantana instead of the native lantana, and "Henry Duelberg" mealy blue sage instead of the native species.

In an ideal world, these exotics would never have been introduced into this country, but we can't undo what has already happened (Bermudagrass was introduced into this country about 200 years ago). And it is certainly true that many introduced species do

not become invasive and, when planted as ornamentals, pose no threat to our ecosystem—crepe myrtle for instance.

Unfortunately, in practice we don't know enough to be able to predict in advance which introduced species will become invasive, spreading uncontrolled and out-competing natives. Some trees have to be in an ecosystem long enough to reach maturity and produce seeds and be present in sufficient populations to cause widespread invasions—Chinese tallow is a good example.

On the other hand, because of the loss of native habitat in the Hill Country to “development”, land fragmentation, overgrazing, and overbrowsing by too many deer, many of our native plant species are declining in numbers and area covered, even when not crowded out by exotics. So the vegetative diversity of the Hill Country is declining.

What can we do about all of this? Both rural landowners as well as city dwellers can begin by never buying and planting any introduced plants and to instead plant only native species, thus protecting the gene pool of natives in the Hill Country as well as not introducing yet another potentially invasive exotic species.

Getting rid of introduced invasives can be a difficult, tedious, long term project, especially on larger properties. So before you start such a project, do some research to determine what works, what doesn't and be prepared for it to be a long term effort.

One way to both learn more about the subject and support efforts by organizations such as your local Native Plant Society of Texas chapter (go to <http://npsot.org>) and our local Texas Master Naturalist chapter (go to <https://txmn.org/hillcountry/>).

Until next time...

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