

Conservation Matters

A monthly column focused on conservation education, as the result of collaboration among several area conservation commissions and organizations. If your town's commission or conservation organization would like to contribute articles, please contact Jessica Tabolt Halm jess_tabolt@hotmail.com

Title: Help Slow the Spread of Invasive Plants

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Have you ever heard of purple loosestrife, Japanese knotweed, or Oriental bittersweet? These are examples of invasive plants found in New Hampshire.

Invasive plants are changing the appearance and function of habitats that we know and love in New Hampshire. What is an invasive plant? In general terms, an invasive plant is one that is non-native and able to spread rapidly throughout the landscape once it is introduced. Invasives can threaten the survival of native plants and animals, interfere with ecosystem functions, threaten agriculture, and endanger human health. Invasive plants spread from site to site by a variety of means, including wind, water, and animals. Another means of spread? People, people, people. Both intentionally and accidentally, people play a big role in spreading invasive plants to new sites. Gardening, decorating, moving fill...anything that involves moving plants or plant parts has the potential to introduce an invasive plant to a new site. Once introduced, these plants spread to adjacent habitats and become difficult to contain.

Many routine maintenance activities in your yard or along our roadsides result in the movement of plants and plant parts. For example, when mowing takes place after invasive plants have gone to seed, the seeds are dragged to new sites by the mower. Many seeds can get lodged in the mower and then fall off when the mower is used at different sites. To make matters worse, some plants can sprout from stem fragments. Consider how many stem fragments are created when mowing and you will understand how mowing can contribute significantly to the spread of certain invasive plants.

One of the most aggressive and ecologically harmful invasive plants in our state is Japanese knotweed. Knotweed is a tall, shrub-like plant with large, heart-shaped leaves and a hollow stem that looks a bit like bamboo (another name for knotweed is Mexican bamboo). Knotweed produces lots of seeds every fall, but these seeds have low viability and often do not germinate. Knotweed does, however, spread readily from fragments of stem and root. A fragment as small as ½" can sprout a new plant. For this reason knotweed should not be mowed! If knotweed must be cut (rather than being pulled or dug up) it can be cut by hand with loppers or a line trimmer, or a sickle bar mower, which doesn't chop up stems as rotary mower does. Any stems or leaves left on the ground may germinate, so all fragments and stems should be bagged and allowed to dry out before disposal at a landfill. Any cut stems should be prevented from getting into flowing water where they can be carried off to new sites.

There are ways to carry out any activity to reduce the likelihood of spreading invasive plants. Whenever possible, any mowing of invasives should be completed before invasive plants go to seed. Seeds and other plant material should be cleaned from the mower at least daily, as well as prior to transport to a new site. Understanding how invasives spread is key to understanding how to control them. Do some research online to learn how to eradicate knotweed and other invasives from your property. Whether you're a homeowner or on the local road crew, spread the word... not the weeds!