

## Do Your Homework

By Susan Camp

Butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*), a native of China, smells sweet and attracts bees and butterflies, but that is no excuse. If I had done my homework, we wouldn't have a dilemma. We bought two *B. davidii* 'Black Knight' shrubs without checking for invasiveness. They are small and weren't expensive, so pulling them out isn't a financial issue. What bothers me is that I usually research non-native species and this time I didn't.

In the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, exotic plants were desirable in gardens because they attracted fewer insect pests. Non-native can thrive and crowd out native plants because they have so few enemies. In addition, they do not provide habitat for butterflies and other insects to lay their eggs. In recent years we have become aware of problems engendered by indiscriminately planting non-native species.

Many of the garden plants popular in our region, including camellias, hostas, most azaleas, and varieties of vines and trees were brought here from somewhere else, primarily from Asia. Not all introduced species became invasive.

*Buddleia davidii* is an invasive species. According to the Missouri Botanical Garden website, *B. davidii* 'Black Knight', a popular cultivar, is hardy in USDA Zones 5 to 9. 'Black Knight' is a deciduous shrub that can reach a height of six to eight feet with a three to five foot spread. It is easy to grow in full sun in well-drained soil. Fragrant clusters of deep purple flowers bloom from early summer through the fall. It is a beautiful shrub that releases thousands of tiny seeds that are easily dispersed by wind and animals. If you have a *B. davidii* cultivar, don't let flower heads go to seed. Deadhead all of the flower heads in the fall.

In some states *B. davidii* is listed as a noxious weed. It is a serious problem in Washington and Oregon, with California not far behind. Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee all report aggressive invasion by *Buddleia*. The North Carolina Native Plant Society lists *B. davidii* as a "Rank 3 Lesser Threat" exotic. The shrub is not included on the Virginia Native Plant Society's "Virginia Invasive Plant Species List", so maybe it isn't a big problem in our area yet, but the potential is there for it to spread outside the garden.

The best alternative is to plant a native shrub. *Clethra alnifolia*, named the 2015 Wildflower of the Year by the Virginia Native Plant society, might be a good choice. Species of *Clethra*, also known as sweet pepperbush and summersweet, are native to North and South America and Asia. *C. alnifolia* is found along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from Nova Scotia to Florida and as far west as east Texas. *Clethra* propagates easily from clumps divided in the fall or early spring or from seed. The shrub likes shaded, low, wet, acidic areas. The white flowers have a spicy-sweet fragrance that bees and butterflies love. *Clethra* has few diseases or insect pests. Purchase *Clethra* from a reputable nursery or garden center rather than harvesting it from the wild.

A second alternative is to plant a sterile hybrid *Buddleia* cultivar. Sterile plants do not set seeds, so they are non-invasive, although they possibly could revert over time and develop seeds. *Buddleia* 'Podaras #15' is an exceptionally beautiful and fragrant shrub with panicles of white flowers and gray-green foliage. It is sold as Flutterby Petite Snow White Butterfly Bush. Bees and butterflies feed on the nectar, but the shrub is not a larval host.

While a sterile hybrid cultivar is non-invasive and provides nectar for bees and butterflies, the problem of habitat remains unsolved. Most non-native plants do not provide a larval host for butterflies. Native plants provide habitat as well as food, so it pays to do a little research before you spend money and effort on plantings that may prove to be problematic. Do your homework.

October 8, 2015