

Invasion of the Forest Snatchers

by Susan Camp

One of the pleasures found in living in rural areas like Gloucester and Mathews Counties is the opportunity to drive down winding, country lanes bordered by lush woodland and open fields. We enjoy our forested and farm lands in every season. We take delight at the new, baby green leaves in spring, are thankful for summer shade, marvel at fall colors, and feel the strength of the tall trees in winter.

Most of us recognize oaks and maples and pines, many of which are true natives to our region, but we often do not recognize the insidious invaders that creep into our woods and fields, covering the land, depleting it of nutritional value, and denying habitat to native animals, birds, and insects. It sounds pretty sinister, doesn't it?

Actually, it is. I am speaking, of course, of non-native, invasive species that threaten our woods and fields. Many of these exotic plants were brought to North America during the 19th and early 20th centuries as garden ornamentals. Others were imported as livestock feed, to forestall erosion, and for surface mine reclamation. A few plants were used in manufacturing tools, musical instruments, or cane fishing poles. Today a few species are still sold for home planting.

A large number of non-native plants have escaped into the environment over the years, spread by animals, birds, insect pollinators, and humans. Why is escape a problem? The plants are green. Some have pretty flowers. They cover banks and prevent soil from washing away. All of these things are true. The problem occurs when a plant is removed from its native environment and introduced into a new area. The non-native plant thrives because there are few or no diseases or insects to damage or destroy it. It can choke out native species of trees, shrubs, grasses, and vines. At the same time, the plant may not provide appropriate food and habitat for native birds and insects, forcing them to find new food sources and places to live.

Mimosa or silktree (*Albizia julibrissin*) is easily recognized in the spring and summer by its feathery, bright pink flowers. Tree-of-Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) grows rapidly, forming dense stands spread by underground root sprouts, as well as seeds dispersed by wind and water. Golden bamboo (*Phyllostachos aurea*) and other exotic bamboo species were commonly planted in the past and have escaped to form impenetrable thickets in some areas. Many of us continue to fight the never-ending battle of tearing out English ivy (*Hedera helix*) and Chinese or Japanese wisteria (*Wisteria sinensis* and *Wisteria floribunda*), mistakenly planted by ourselves or previous homeowners. These invasives are all found on the Middle Peninsula, but many other less recognizable species also thrive here.

A number of resources exist to help landowners and farmers cope with the problem of invasive species. The website of the Virginia Cooperative Extension Program of VA Tech and VA State provides numerous helpful publications that can be downloaded for free. Gloucester and

Mathews Master Gardeners can answer questions and provide information on available resources. Gloucester Master Gardeners are available in the Main Library each Tuesday from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM to help you find the answers you need. Master Gardeners also man the phone line at the Gloucester Extension Office from 2 PM to 4 PM each Thursday. The number is (804) 693-2602.

In addition, Tree Stewards are available in Gloucester to assist members of the community with tree issues and problems. Tree Stewards are advanced Master Gardeners who have completed an extensive course of study including tree identification, correct planting and pruning techniques, tree diseases and pests, and safe pest management techniques.

Other excellent resources are publications of the USDA US Forest Service, in particular, *A Field Guide for the Identification of Invasive Plants in Southern Forests* (2012) by Miller, Chambliss, and Loewenstein and its companion volume *A Management Guide for Invasive Plants in Southern Forests* (2010) by Miller, Manning, and Enloe.

General techniques for managing invasive plants, garnered from various publications, include the following steps:

1. Recognize non-native invasive species.
2. Do not plant invasive species.
3. Remove or safely destroy invasive plants.
4. Sanitize the invaded area to prevent or decrease seed spread.
5. Educate neighbors and business owners about invasive species.
6. Replant area with native species.

January 23, 2014