

Beware the Imposters!

This could be just a pitch for planting native plants but it is also a warning against planting invasives. And, not only planting them, but actually ordering them and paying real money for them. Were they being given away, you might ask “why” but seeing them offered for sale, you may assume they must have value as plant material?

What prompted this message was seeing an ad for fast-growing hedge material, autumn olive. It is not an olive although the small dark berry is olive shaped: it is *Elaeagnus umbellata*. Virginia, among many other states, spends great sums in an effort to eradicate this plant that damages vulnerable ecosystems.

Autumn olive was imported from China and Japan in 1830 for use in shelterbelts and strip mine reclamation. Silverthorn or thorny olive, *Elaeagnus pungens* is a larger shrub, to 25 feet with seeds easily spread by animals. By invading southern forests these shrubs damage the forest productivity essential to the southern economy. Equally invasive is a cousin, the small tree, Russian olive, *E. angustifolia* that was initially planted as a garden ornamental. It, too, has infested Virginia.

Still popular and still featured in catalogs, although it has been on Virginia’s invasive species list for years, is winged burning bush, *Euonymus alatus*. It was imported in the 1860s and widely planted as an ornamental. It is a glorious scarlet to purplish red in fall and is shade tolerant. But not only do animals disperse the seed, the plant suckers, forming colonies, difficult and expensive to remove. As well as by its lovely fall color, it can be identified by the corky ridges on the stems.

There are few gardens in Gloucester and Mathews that do not have plants of *Nandina*. Once you have one, you will have more and gardeners have been asked to avoid planting it. Sometimes called heavenly bamboo because of the overlapping sheaths on the main stem, it has become very invasive in Virginia and places south of here. The good news is that there are cultivars of this plant that are reputed to be sterile. Often smaller, with the same pretty red berries, these plants are becoming more available.

Since I have pulled out a lot of unwanted privet, I wasn’t surprised to find both Chinese/European (*Ligustrum sinense*) and Japanese/Glossy (*L. japonicum* or *L. lucidum*) privet listed as invasive. These are handsome shrubs with mostly evergreen shiny foliage and attractive flowers and seeds but the damage they do by their persistent and aggressive fecundity is considerable.

Small plants can be invasive but their damage is less extensive. In extreme climates their tenuous hold on life prevents their becoming notorious but in our indulgent climate they spread like unfounded rumors. That list includes Japanese pachysandra (*P. terminalis* not the native *P. procumbens*, Allegheny spurge), vinca, wintercreeper, Japanese honeysuckle, ajuga, oriental bittersweet, multiflora rose, English ivy. Another

vine, Kudzu, is in a class by itself. I expect the only cure for Kudzu is finding it can be used as both weight loss drug and aphrodisiac.

I've noticed garlic mustard flourishing along roadsides here and Japanese barberry is invasive on my city lot, springing up and requiring tough gloves to pull out the thorny sprouts. Once all these uninvited guests have been removed they can easily be replaced with plants that belong here, that have sufficient enemies to keep them in check and sufficient value to wildlife to have long term value to the landscape. Most of them are beautiful!

The structure, leaves, flowers, seeds and fruit of natives provide food and shelter for the birds that feast on the bad bugs attacking your vegetable garden. Using native plants saves time, money, and water. They grow here without amended soil and expensive fertilizers.

Rather than trying to grow grass in shady places, use ferns. There are dozens to chose from, all fascinating. For edges and hedges think of tall grasses and grass-like plants. The bluestems are particularly handsome but all of these native grasses become more interesting the more you study them.

Natives are found everywhere such as heuchera, liatris, lilies, asters, goldenrods, geraniums, gentians, phlox, cardinal flower, beebalm, evening primrose, foam flower. Others you may have to find at a nursery specializing in native plants. Native shrubs are also abundant: callicarpa, buttonbush, clethra, several dogwoods, witch hazel, hydrangeas, several hollies, Virginia sweetspire, mountain laurel, leucothoe, lindera benzoin, wax myrtle, red and black chokeberry, ninebark, rhododendron, sumac, elderberry, spirea, blueberry, viburnum. Natives suit every taste, every space, every budget!