



UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Bad Berries by Dawn Pettinelli

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Bright red or orange berries are usually a desirable sight in the fall landscape. While those reddish fruits on winterberry, evergreen hollies, viburnums and crabapples are both lovely to look at and a valuable source of food for birds and other animals, there are several reddish berried plants that the landscape would be better off without. I'm not sure which one is the worst offender as they all are on the CT Invasive Plant List. All were brought over from Asia.

As our deciduous trees lose their leaves, the bright orange and red berries of the Oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*) become very apparent. These plants are amazingly quick growers and can scamper up a tree faster than you can say, "Fetch me my pruners!" or so it seems. Bittersweet is not picky about where it grows and will frequent roadsides, woodlands, or open areas. Not only does Oriental bittersweet shade out native plants but it strangles trees as it climbs them. Vines can be up to 60 feet long! Birds feed on the berries so new plants can sprout wherever their droppings land. We do have an American bittersweet but it does put on as showy a display.



Bittersweet - Photo by dmp2023

Burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*) is still being sold in many states and listed in nursery catalogs as it is hard to beat the magnificent fiery red color of its fall foliage. This plant was brought here around 1860 as an ornamental landscape plant. Now it is growing along much of the East Coast, from New England to Florida as well as in Illinois. It continues to invade our natural habitats

whether woodlands, roadsides or meadows. Plants can produce hundreds of seeds which grow into hundreds of seedlings displacing our native plants. There is also a native deciduous euonymus (*E. americana*) often referred to as ‘hearts-a-bustin’.



Burning Bush - Photo by dmp2023

While I don't find bittersweet nightshade (*Solanum dulcamara*) as pervasive as some other invasives, it still is on the list. Curious, small purple flowers mature into clusters of bright red berries. The woody vines can reach 10 feet in length, but I see them scrambling more through woody shrubs than up trees. All parts of the plant are toxic, and some notice a contact dermatitis if they touch the plant without gloves.

Thorny invasives are even harder to deal with. Multiflora rose was also introduced around 1860. It was used as an ornamental, by rose breeders as a rootstock and recommended by the Soil Conservation Service for erosion control, wildlife habitat and as a living fence to contain livestock. It soon spread uncontrollably and was labelled a noxious weed. This vigorous grower can send out 10 to 15-foot canes that can creep up trees or just really hinder you from cutting them at the base. The clusters of flowers borne in late May and early June are quite fragrant, but they are followed by rose hips containing seeds. According to one source, a single plant may produce up to 500,000 seeds – that's a half million. Seeds can remain viable for 10 to 20 years in the soil!

Japanese barberry does not get as large as a multiflora rose, but I swear it has more thorns. The elongated red berries persist into winter where they may be eventually eaten by birds. I've heard you can make barberry jelly from them but wrestling so many berries from such a thorny plant might not appeal to many folks. Especially in wooded areas, you'll notice barberries getting leaves earlier in the spring than many neighboring plants. Since these plants start to photosynthesize earlier and longer, they can outcompete natives that leaf out later. Also, black legged tick populations have been found to be higher in sites with abundant barberry plants. One

reason might be that the field mice are hosts to the black legged ticks and predators that feed on the mice, like owls, hawks and foxes, have difficulty getting through barberry bushes to capture their prey. So, the mice living in barberry patches could be more protected.

Lastly, although it is not on the CT Invasive Species List, lily of the valley with its reddish berries is on mine. The fragrance of those delicate, white, bell-shaped flowers is just delightful except the plants I have, don't smell. I might be able to tolerate them if they did. I just wanted a little patch of sweetly scented blossoms and instead I have vigorous plants with no fragrance running rampant through the garden.

Getting rid of any of these invasive plants is challenging so best to attend to them when they are young seedlings. You can dig the plants out, which can be challenging, cut them down to the ground continuously for several years, or use herbicides. Be on the lookout for invading seedlings as plants can establish themselves quite quickly. If you have questions about controlling or identifying native plants or any other gardening question, call the UConn Home and Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-4274 or visit us at www.homegarden.cahn.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.