

What Should You Look for at the Garden Center: Non-Invasives!

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Continuing with my series on what customers should look for when shopping at local garden centers, I'd like to talk about plants you should look for...and avoid!

Many of our favorite landscape plants have proven to be very invasive. They escape our yards and invade fields, wooded areas, and wetlands. They crowd out native plants, changing habitats and ecosystems. Wildlife, including deer, often cannot feed on these alien plants, and are therefore forced into our gardens looking for a meal.

One of the most objectionable plants is the ornamental pear. While I've never made a secret of my dislike for the Bradford pear because of its poor branch structure and short lifespan, it turns out that Bradford can cross-pollinate with all of the other ornamental pears (Aristocrat, Chanticleer, etc.). The tiny fruit are eaten by birds, and then the seeds dropped along fencerows and the edges of woodlots. In another couple of months, you will be able to see how invasive these wild pears are by taking a drive anywhere in the tristate: all of the dense, white-blooming plants are pears. Avoid these like the plague!

Burning bush, a species of euonymus, is prized for its brilliant red fall color. And that's about all it has going for it. Otherwise, it's a big, shapeless green mass throughout the season. Its tiny red berries are eaten by birds, who drop them in wooded areas. I've seen entire understory areas completely taken over by this plant, squeezing out all of the native woodland flowers. If you want red fall color, consider planting native species such as chokeberry (Aronia), Fothergilla, or Virginia sweetspire.

Japanese honeysuckle and bush honeysuckle are all foreign, non-native species. They squeeze out native plants, and can strangle young trees. There are some native honeysuckles that are not as aggressive or damaging, but still quite attractive. Other native plants with attractive blooms and fruit include serviceberry, Carolina allspice, and elderberry.

So many of our groundcover plants can easily get out of control. English ivy climbs trees, weighing down limbs and hiding trunk defects. Periwinkle (Vinca) and wintercreeper euonymus swarm forest floors, overgrow low-growing natives, and displace native plant communities. Crown vetch holds down the soil, sure, but then it disperses its seeds over wide areas.

Before you go shopping, take a few minutes and read some of the information on invasive species and the damage they do. Jot down what characteristics you find important in the tree, shrub, or vine you want to buy, and then see if you can locate a

native on non-invasive plant that will do the same thing. Then, list in hand, go to our local garden centers and nurseries and buy them; and if they don't carry them, see if they'll order them for you.

For more information on alternatives for non-invasive landscape plants, contact the Purdue Extension Service.