

For Vermont Standard

For May 12 --Sage Sassafras column on gardening

Know What You Grow

If you see a gardener on all fours chewing at her garden, she's digesting gout weed. Said to be edible in spring, she hopes gumming it will get the bloody stuff out. A young friend who logs and farms says he's tried to get barberry off his land but it just keeps growing back.

Whether in the garden or on the landscape, invasive species, think barberry and gout weed, are on the most wanted – to get rid of – list.

Knowledge, however, is a gardener's friend. In some parts of the country it's a nail in the gardening coffin to import bamboo. Just the thought of a northward-moving kudzu can make a Yankee quake. In fact, invasive species could well lead to a new civil war as they spread widely and cause harm by crowding out native vegetation, monopolizing light, nutrients, soil, moisture, and space. Invasive species can potentially wreak environmental and economic harm.

Following are examples of how invasive plants do damage. The monarch butterfly, which requires milkweeds for reproduction, will cue into black swallow-wort and lay eggs, but the larvae do not survive. Exotic bush honeysuckles release toxic chemicals that prevent other plant species from growing in the vicinity. They compete with native bush honeysuckles for pollinators, resulting in reduced seed set for native species off of which migrating birds will feed. Burning bush threatens even mature forests because it out-competes native species. Wildlife dependant on early plants for their foliage, pollen, nectar, fruits, seeds and roots are deprived of these essential food sources when garlic mustard replaces them. The chemicals in garlic mustard appear to be toxic to the eggs of the butterfly, as evidenced by their failure to hatch when laid on garlic mustard plants. Invasives can take over a marsh community, crowding out native plants and changing the marsh hydrology, which alters wildlife habitat.

For more information on controlling and pictures of invasive plants:

www.newenglandwild.org/protect/invasive-plants and

www.woodstockgardenclub.org/conservation. Check
www.woodstockgardenclub.org for other mindful gardening ideas.
Mother Nature needs all the attention we can pay her.