

Invasive Plants in Massachusetts: An Update for 2003

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"People are major dispersers of plants. The magnitude of this dispersal is unprecedented and has allowed dispersal of species that manifest aggressive traits in new areas. Plant introduction and improvement are the foundation of modern agriculture and horticulture, yielding diversity to our supply of plants used for food, forestry, landscapes and gardens, medicinal, and other purposes. A small proportion of introduced plant species become invasive and cause unwanted impacts to natural systems and biological diversity as well as economies, recreation, and health. Plant species can be invasive in some regions, but not in others." These were the initial findings agreed upon in December 2001 by experts from across the globe, meeting in St. Louis, Missouri. Their mission was to explore options and develop workable, voluntary approaches for reducing the introduction and spread of invasive plants that seriously threaten biodiversity and ecosystems in the United States and other countries¹.

During that meeting, the group agreed on and drafted voluntary Codes of Conduct for the five groups participating: Government, Nursery Professionals, Landscape Architects, Botanic Gardens and Arboreta, and the Gardening Public. These are the Draft Codes of Conduct for Nursery Professionals, now approved by many nursery associations:

- Ensure that invasive potential is assessed prior to introducing and marketing plant species new to North America. Invasive potential should be assessed by the introducer or qualified experts using emerging risk assessment methods that consider plant characteristics and prior observations or experience with the plant elsewhere in the world. Additional insights may be gained through extensive monitoring of the nursery site prior to further distribution.

- Work with regional experts and stakeholders to determine those species in your region that are either currently invasive or will become invasive. Identify plants that could be suitable alternatives in your region.

- Develop and promote alternative plant material through plant selection and breeding.

- Where agreement has been reached

among nursery associations, government, academia, and ecology and conservation organizations, phase-out existing stocks of those specific invasive species in regions where they are considered to be a threat.

- Follow all laws on importation and quarantine of plant materials across political boundaries.

- Encourage customers to use, and garden writers to promote, non-invasive plants.

In 1999, our Massachusetts Nursery and Landscape Association (MNLA) and New England Nursery Association (NENA) helped form a working group to identify scientific criteria² upon which to judge invasiveness of a suspect species in Massachusetts' varied geographic/soil/climatic regions. The intent of this effort was to establish a credible base for developing a long-term strategy, and also to screen-out confusing anecdotal observations. This group includes representatives from more than a dozen other

The results of his testing confirmed 26 species as "invasive" with 11 species as "likely invasive". Explanatory notes accompany all the designations and help describe the invasive characteristics in further detail.

Among these species are a number that are still commonly available in commerce, including *Aegopodium podagraria*, *Berberis thunbergii*, *Celastrus orbiculatus*, *Eleagnus umbellata*, *Iris pseudoacorus*, *Lonicera x bella*, *L. japonica*, *L. morrowii*, and *Rhamnus frangula* (now named *Frangula alnus*). An additional number of species are yet to be put through the criteria. We expect the initial list of nearly 80 species to be finished in 2003, provided sufficient funding is available.

Thus, several elements are now in place both in Massachusetts and nationally for conducting a successful strategy for the nursery industry and other stakeholders to manage the effects of invasive plants. The burden now is to



The findings of the MNLA sponsored research were presented for review to the Invasive Plant Council on September 23, 2002. A draft of the research findings will be released in the January Issue of Nursery News and will be soon uploaded to the MNLA web page www.mnla.com.

concerned organizations³ and is focusing on developing non-legislative/regulatory solutions to this complex issue.

In 2001, Dr. Leslie Mehrhoff began the process of testing an initial group of 39 species suspected to be invasive, utilizing these criteria. Grants for funding this project came from the MNLA, the Horticultural Research Institute, and the Mass. Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

establish *Best Management Practices* for each stakeholder to achieve the overall objectives we all seek.

Establishing Best Management Practices is another complex task that must consider a multitude of factors. No unilateral effort can be successful unless it takes into account the invasive plants already established in natural areas. A program that combines strategies for



Don Bishop of The Gard'ner and Randy Probstak, UMass Amherst Educator take a moment to discuss the research findings with Beth Goetel of the US Fish & Wildlife.

education, eradication, and elimination is called for — region by region. And once that process has been defined, economic concerns must also be examined and evaluated to determine what actions best accomplish the objectives.

The nursery industry is only one part of the picture. To successfully address the challenges, individuals from many fields must undertake collaborative efforts. We are currently involving those of us in wholesale/retail/landscape nurseries, horticulture and landscape architecture and design. Leaders in government departments and agencies, educational institutions, botanical gardens, garden clubs, garden writers, weed science, ecology, conservation groups, foundations, and informed individuals must also do their parts if this is to succeed.

As the issues around invasive plants evolve, we urge you to become more aware of the challenges and learn how you can participate effectively in optimizing results. Please check our website (www.WestonNurseries.com) periodically to view updates and links to other sources of information.

(Footnotes)

¹ See www.mobot.org/iss for complete information

² See www.mnla.com for details about the criteria and the role MNLA is taking.

³ Included in the Plant Evaluation Subcommittee of the Invasive Plant Working Group are representatives from these organizations: American Nursery and Landscape Association, Brewster Natural Resources, Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture, Ecological Landscaping Association, Harvard University Arnold Arboretum, Massachusetts District Commission, Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, Massachusetts



Researcher Les Mehrhoff presents the research findings of the initial 39 plants that were used to test the developed criteria.

Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program and Advisory Committee, Massachusetts Nursery and Landscape Association, NSTAR Services, New England Nursery Association, New England Wildflower Society, Northeast Weed Science Society, Silvio Conte National Fish & Wildlife Refuge, The Nature Conservancy, University of Connecticut and UMass Extension. 🌳

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