

My Experiences with Alien Invasive Plants

By Richard Damro
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My background is in biology. I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in 1958 with a major in biology and then came back for a fifth year at Stevens Point. After that I was on to Southern Illinois University for a semester of biology and then a semester at University of Wisconsin-Madison. I signed on to teach biology at Colfax High School in the fall of 1960. After spending a summer session on the UW-Madison campus I finally graduated with a master's degree in 1963 with a joint botany-zoology major. I went on to teach biology and advanced biology at Colfax for 30 years and I also taught astronomy and environmental concerns during some semesters.

Way back in 1965 I was fortunate to stumble upon a rundown, very sandy soil farm two miles north of Colfax on the banks of the Red Cedar River. In the farm's past, no one had owned it for more than five years as one droughty summer would put the owners of that little farm out of business. I was not dependent upon the farm to make a living there and currently I have owned it for 52 years.

For the first 25 years, due to a limited budget and time, the farm served mainly as a place to hunt and fish, a source of firewood and eventually a place to grow Christmas trees. The farm also shrank from 160 acres to 105 as I sold that portion that was across the river to the north. Those Christmas trees served as a source of income and wildlife habitat. At the time of purchase the only large trees on the farm were the slowly dying American elms as they were being attacked by an alien invasive fungus. They were gradually replaced naturally by ash which are now doomed by an alien invasive insect, the emerald ash borer. It appears that the ash will be replaced with hackberry at least in the river bottom forests.

I remember, it had to be in the early 80's, that from my raised deer stand I could see that there were a few large shrubs or small trees that were still very green during the November gun hunting season for deer. I walked over to one of them on several occasions and just nothing seemed to register in my mind as to its identity. Sometime after that a friend of mine and a professor at UW Stout looked at it and said it was buckthorn. I hate to admit that I did not know what it was even though I had had a course in tree and shrub identification, buckthorn was not included in the 1950's course I took. Neither was bush honeysuckle or any other plants that are now known as alien and invasive.

Wow; how things have changed! Now invasive species are everywhere and costs us millions of dollars in our efforts to eliminate or at least control them. Up until this time prickly ash was the culprit, although a native, it is very aggressive. It is everywhere in the flood plain forest on my farm. It is the reason I did not closely observe that first buckthorn tree and two species on the farm. The prickly ash was so thick in the flood plain forest that it was only at the gun deer season that I ventured very far from the narrow walking trails that I tried to maintain. Then I learned that the various species of bush honeysuckles that were already prevalent on the farm were also invasive and alien.

I believe it was in the mid to late 80's that I started to attempt to control both the honeysuckle and the buckthorn plants. I simply sawed them down. Little did I know that the birds, mainly huge flocks of robins that found cover in them in route south, had already spread the seeds all over the farm. The robins would sit and roost all around me while hunting from that first tree stand eating the berries and the quickly disposing them with fertilizer to the sandy ground.

My first attempt at killing invasive plants was when I tried to poison off scrub oaks that were invading my Christmas trees on one of the drier sites. I used a cut stump method of control. I would cut the small oak sapling and apply Tordon® to the cut surface and it did a very good job. A year later I noticed that some of the Christmas trees were turning a slight yellow. I called the DNR and an entomologist came over. When he stumbled over one of the cut off oak "stumps" I mentioned to him that it was just an oak stump left over from my cutting with a Tordon® application. He said that Tordon® was the strongest of chemicals that I could have used and that he does not allow it on any DNR controlled land. One of the problems with it is that it will "flashback" into nearby plants. So much for that effort!

I remember that it was one of those winters in the early 90's that we had very little snow that I attacked the honeysuckle with a chainsaw by cutting them as close to the ground as I could. That winter I had attended a meeting of the newly formed invasive plant group at UW Eau Claire. It was there that I learned how to make a "kill stick" herbicide applicator using PVC material. I used a solution of one-half water and one-half Roundup in my new toy. It was very effective as a stump treatment for honeysuckle. I eliminated all of the old bushes and thought that the job was done. I was WRONG!

Several years passed where I did nothing with the invasive plants. Small buckthorns and honeysuckles were coming up all over. I felt beaten. Then I attended a regional meeting of the Prairie Enthusiasts held at UW Stout. At one of the booths I visited with Lee Shambau of 4 Control Inc., a private company that deals with chemicals that controls invasive plants. I purchased one gallon of Element 4® (a generic form of Garlon 4®) and one gallon of bark oil with a blue dye in it. I used it as a cut stump treatment on both buckthorn and honeysuckle and also as a basal bark treatment on buckthorn. I had better luck with the cut stump treatment. But because that work aggravated my back, the invasive plants continued to win.

The next step in my invasive plant effort came when Jim Anderson, a Dunn County Board Member and close friend, invited me to become an active board member in the Lower Chippewa Invasive Partnership (LCIP). This organization spearheads the efforts to combat the inroads being made by invasive plants in the five western Wisconsin counties along the lower Chippewa River, namely Chippewa, Eau Claire, Dunn, Pierce, and Pepin. Through attending their monthly meetings, I learned a great deal about fighting the alien invasive plants in our area. I learned of some invasives that were quite prevalent in our area of which I had no former knowledge. I helped LCIP map the Wild Chervil invasion in the Town of Grant here in Dunn Co. Then I was helping to map the Amur Cork Tree in the city of Menomonie. It seemed as if the ball was in my court and I couldn't help responding.

From there it went to field trips to identify invasive plants, helping the Anderson Window employees remove invasives along the Lake Menomín shore in Lakeside Park, Leinenkugel employees remove invasives from along Duncan Creek in Erickson Park in Chippewa Falls, helping Beaver Creek Reserve staff and volunteers pulling Purple Loosestrife from along the banks of the Lower Chippewa River. I tried some things on my own by spraying an invasion of Wild Chervil on one of my friend's farm and spraying a large invasion of Japanese Knotweed along County A in Chippewa County. I've spotted several more patches of Japanese Knotweed waiting for me this summer.

There are so many wonderful things to observe as I travel around the area. But I have been bitten by the bug that wants me to fight invasive plants. I see them all over. They stand out and have become an eye sore for me. They detract from my quiet rides through the countryside. Buckthorn, honeysuckles, Japanese knotweed, wild parsnip, and spotted knapweed are the most obvious and noxious to me. Now the plants I have seen for years like sweet clover, birds foot trefoil, orange hawkweed, wild brome and the invading common tansy now bug me, too.

As each year passes and with every relaxation drive I understand more and more what Aldo Leopold meant when he wrote, "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise." LCIP is anxious to tell them otherwise!