

LCIP Member Invasives Case Study

March 2018

When we were fortunate enough to move into this area and onto partially wooded pasture land with hills and ponds and varied soils, we assumed the landscape was rooted here by its natural history as firmly as it was to the earth. So we assumed that a particular, larger elm would one day be a great elm and the butternut trees would feed the squirrels, and the squirrels the owls. The big ash trees too, they'd dominate even the sugar maples. The more lightly wooded land was already filling with shrubs full of berries so we didn't have to think too much about the undergrowth for the trees we planted among the existing natives. Our plan was to give it a start and then let the world around it, and the seed sources already in place, do what they would to fill it up. We would take downed wood for fire, pick black caps and watch our land gather its content. It was the seventies. The idea of owning land was odd but the intention to let it flourish was not.

Eight years later a nearby woodland came up for sale. It was a larger, more heavily wooded version of our home place and our plan for it was the same. We planted native trees and shrubs on thirty acres of worn out cropland and planned to watch the rest grow on its own. We thought that beyond trail making and maintenance, the work should center on getting the new plantings off to a good start. About four years into this adventure I was walking this woods with our forester and he asked: "You know these are invasive don't you?" When I asked which ones he meant he said: "All of them." We were standing in the berry bushes, the major component of the understory and edges of everything we cared for. In that moment our responsibilities became enormous and I knew we had more land than we could keep healthy. The bushes were an invasive exotic shrub honeysuckle, fresh from Asia. Who knew? Very few knew. The seeds of this plant were being given away by forestry and wildlife agencies in many states through much of the 1970s. The myth was that the berries were good for birds (birds love them but suffer from a lack of fat when they eat a diet of honeysuckle berries). The additional promises: that they are good for erosion control and make good habitat, are also in error. Relative to native plants which coevolved with the rest of this range, Eurasian bush honeysuckles are detrimental in every way. I guess the answer to "Who knew?" became "Now I do."

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It seems we are born into our time with its general trends, and into our place with its wealth of particulars; and naturally accept what is at hand as normal. When we moved into an area full of this invasive species we took superficial note of the honeysuckle's qualities, then moved on to other things. It is very difficult to accept this new normal and even thirty years later invasive species take a toll on walks in woodlands, any of which might have a plague and be spreading it too.

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I recall our first attack on a two acre hillside began with hand pulling any honeysuckle that would budge. The hillside has been clean for six years - we worked on it in bursts for nineteen years. It's the hill that runs off east below our house. Good idea #1: work where it makes the most difference to you. Not only there, but steadily there.

Since that first effort I have used every method I could imagine to remove the scourge except goats. In the right place any of these might work: hand pull, pull with a tractor, pry out with a brush wrench, chop with a brush mower and poison the stumps, cut with a chainsaw and poison the stumps, pry out with a pallet fork on a tractor, push out with a tractor bucket, foliar spray, fire and the winner - basal bark spray. Good idea #2: don't do what I did. If you think one of these methods could bring you joy, use it. Otherwise I have two quick facts in favor of basal bark spray. One; it's how the pros do it. Two: I have killed roughly as many honeysuckles using bbs for seventy five hours as I have using all other methods for twenty two years. I settled on the bbs method because it; is effective, is quiet, focuses herbicide on a small area, is fast, is mechanically simple, is not torture and doesn't disturb the soil. On the downside I hate being a poison distributor but I have faced up to it being a matter of use herbicide or quit. In terms of downsides I prefer starting with the fundamental downside. Invasive plants, animals and diseases are an existential threat to the hope we have for a healthy landscape. Humans invented this problem. Perhaps we can help.

Basal bark spray is simple and with care, quite safe. There is one tool, a one-handed sprayer that shoots a solid stream of an herbicide and bark oil mixture. It's pretty much a super squirt gun with a range of nearly twenty feet. Mature bush honeysuckle have multiple stems from one to five inch diameters. They separate just above the ground. The target is the first eight inches above the ground. You don't have to push through the branches to spray. Instead, shoot from three different positions around the perimeter and cover the small target area

completely. Then walk away for two seasons and return to a dead invasive plant that will turn brittle and fall to the ground in three or four years; no piling or burning required. For a large specimen the actual time spent stalking and spraying is about three minutes. Then look around, find another, repeat.

Good idea #3: use the local resources. Thirty years ago invasives were invisible. The forester who clued me in had been to my land often and taught forestry classes I attended. Invasive species were not mentioned. Then there was an awakening to the new reality of invasives of all kinds brought to the Americas during the entire European occupation. Today the Lower Chippewa Invasives Partnership is an excellent resource for how to identify invasives and the range of treatments that will successfully remove them. I have learned more about invasive plants during three years as an LCIP member than I did in the twenty five years I worked on my own. LCIP meetings are always open to interested people who want to learn or teach or work. LCIP has partnered with 4-Control, a local business that excels at invasive removal. They share their long term and wide ranging experience with anyone planning to combat invasive plants. I believe they are as good as there is.

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Looking back it wasn't naïve to expect the elm and butternut and ash to continue to prosper. They were old stalwarts of the continent. But only the ash still lives here and the emerald ash borer is twenty miles away. There is no remedy for this invader or for the canker that took the butternuts or the beetle and its fungus that took the elms. The diseases and insects are invasive too.

Nor was it naïve to think we could keep two hundred acres of Wisconsin woodland healthy. It had been possible in the past. What is here and now is a new normal and those born into it will accept the invaders as normal until they learn otherwise. What a sad message we have to deliver; one that I was spared for forty two years.

Our original forty acres are about three years from being 95% invasive free. Birds are seeding many new, native elderberries in the forest shade. Spring wildflowers cover the hillside below the house. In scale these are minor victories. Our place has given so much, this was the least we could do.