

Invasive Plants – What Does That Mean? (published 2024-11-09)
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We’ve all had a plant that we put in the garden only to see it muscle out everything else. Some groundcovers are really good at taking over. Vines can cover an area in no time if not kept in check. And self-seeding flowers can also become a nuisance. But there’s more to it than what’s in your garden. And we need to distinguish invasive from aggressive plants.

An aggressive plant spreads quickly and can overtake an area intended for other plants. They can be native or non-native and may not be considered aggressive in the right setting. If you want a groundcover, it should be somewhat aggressive to cover your area quickly and suppress weed growth.

According to the USDA National Invasive Species Information Center, an invasive plant is non-native to the location and is likely to cause harm economically, environmentally, or cause human health issues. Think about the damage done by kudzu and the billions of dollars spent to try to eradicate it. However, a non-native plant is not necessarily invasive. Most of our vegetables are non-native and that’s just fine.

There are also more invasive plants than what you see in your yard or gardens. For example, burning bush is considered invasive. It readily spreads throughout the landscape. Every time I mention this to someone, they automatically say they don’t see it spreading in the yard. Just because you can’t see the plant spread, doesn’t mean it’s not invading somewhere else.

Plants have their own methods of spreading seeds depending on the plants make-up and the environment. They are pretty clever, too. Here are ways plants spread to other areas.

Wind

Milkweed and dandelions have fluffy parachute-like structures that the wind loves to catch and waft away. Maple trees have winged seeds (I like to call them twirlies) that spin as the wind picks them up. Wind does a great job of taking seeds far away from the parent plant.

Water

Some seeds are water-proof and can float far away if the water is deep enough. Some of these seeds can also sink after a while and germinate close to the parent.

Animals and Birds

Birds like to “deposit” seeds they’ve eaten through their poo. I know my mailbox has proof that the birds have been eating blackberries. And in that pretty blue poo are seeds. Squirrels love to harvest nuts and bury them for winter meals. Bingo, a new oak tree can pop up somewhere.

To be sure you know which plants are considered invasive in Tennessee, check out the Tennessee Invasive Species list and learn which plants should be avoided in your gardens. You’ll be surprised at some of the plants listed. <https://www.tnipc.org/invasive-plants/>

Resources

“What are Invasive Species?,” <https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/what-are-invasive-species>

“Invasive Plant Definitions: Native, Invasive, Aggressive and Non-native,”
<https://moinvasives.org/about/invasive-plant-definitions-native-invasive-aggressive/>

“How do plants disperse their seeds?”
<https://libanswers.nybg.org/faq/223425>

“Seed Dispersal,”
<https://www.sciencefacts.net/seed-dispersal.html>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site:
<https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.