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KC WildLands works to combat attractive killers in prairies, woods

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Article Text:

The enemy in the woods this day is a pretty white wildflower on a long stem. There's one over there. And there.

"Once you get a visual, you'll see it everywhere," said Linda Lehrbaum to a group of young people putting on their work gloves. "We're going to spread out through the woods. This is seek and destroy."

The delicate-looking plant with heart-shaped leaves has a curious name, garlic mustard, and it's on Lehrbaum's hit list. She wants it gone. Pulled out by the roots and bagged.

On this cool, overcast Sunday morning, Lehrbaum is leading about 25 college volunteers into an area of Swope Park for this single-minded purpose.

It's spring, the easiest time to spot the plant, an invader in these parts. Lehrbaum is program manager of Kansas City WildLands, which is restoring an area of the park — oak savannas and limestone glades — overtaken by non-native species.

Plants such as garlic mustard and honeysuckle are viruses on the landscape, experts say. They overtake native plants and flowers and threaten woodlands and prairies.

Such invaders aren't only in our parks and natural areas. The spring planting season is a good time to assess our yards, said Larry Rizzo, natural history biologist at the Missouri Department of Conservation. We've planted some of these invaders on purpose, not knowing the threat.

In some cases, people will be none too happy to hear what plants need to go, Alan Branhagen, horticulture director at Powell Gardens, said. Offenders include honeysuckle, both the shrub variety and the vine called Japanese honeysuckle, and winter creeper, a ground cover. And burning bush, a favorite in Kansas City area yards for its brilliant red color in the fall.

"I'll get hate mail for that one," Branhagen said.

The expert advice is to remove offending plants if you can. At the least, don't plant any new invasive "exotics" in your yard. Some grow and spread rapidly before your eyes. Others seem harmless in the yard, but they don't stay put. They are spread by wildlife and the wind.

Exotic is the term used by biologists and horticulturists for non-native species, and most were brought here from Europe and Asia. Garlic mustard might have been used as an herb in cooking. Its crushed leaves smell of garlic.

In its native place, Lehrbaum said, garlic mustard is attractive to a variety of pests, which help keep it at bay. Bugs here don't care for it, so it spreads unchecked. Native flora can't compete with a plant given free rein. In the battle for turf, garlic mustard wins.

Even worse, in a type of chemical warfare, the plant is believed to infuse the soil around it with a compound that hinders tree growth.

"It can destroy a forest," Lehrbaum said.

Not all exotic plants are a problem, Rizzo said. Non-native plants now familiar in the Midwest — daylilies and common daisies, for example — aren't a threat to native species.

Dandelions? They're exotic, and they certainly seem invasive in our lawns, but their impact on native ecosystems is minimal, he said.

But exotics that are invasive pose an enormous threat.

"Invasive exotic species are the second leading cause of animal and plant extinction, next to out-and-out habitat destruction," Rizzo said.

To experience "invasive," Rizzo said, just travel around town and observe. Winter creeper, when it's allowed to climb rather than stay on the ground, makes berries, which are spread by birds. Once established in natural areas, it scales the trees.

"Go to Cave Spring (Historic Site) at Blue Ridge and Gregory and take a look at the woods," Rizzo said. "It's our version of kudzu."

The first blush of spring brings a green glow to the woods around the metro area, but unfortunately most of it is honeysuckle, Rizzo said.

"Take a drive on Gregory from Swope Park to Interstate 435," Rizzo said. "There's a forest of oak trees, but the understory is almost a solid wall of honeysuckle."

That means the honeysuckle bushes are suffocating native plants. They're also preventing the forest floor from getting sunlight, which is needed for new growth.

"When those big oaks drop their acorns, there's no reproduction going on," he said.

As if battling existing exotics weren't enough, new threats emerge. The ornamental pear tree is one of those.

"They're really going to be the next monsters," Branhagen said.

The Bradford pear tree, a type of "callery" pear, quickly became the darling of landscapers. Homeowners loved its nearly perfect round shape and the explosion of white blooms in the spring. Bradfords line streets and grace yards across the metro area.

They didn't produce fruit and weren't invasive — at first.

But the trees were easily damaged in storms, often cleaving spectacularly. So new varieties were introduced that were expected to be more resistant to damage.

"That was the big mistake," Branhagen said.

The trees began to cross-pollinate, and hybrids produced pearlets, small fruit that starlings love. Now, callery pear trees are popping up in fields. The Columbia, Mo., parks department has begun a “Stop the spread!” campaign, urging homeowners and landscapers to stop planting callery pears.

“It’s going to be really bad in prairies and savannas,” Branhagen said. “Meadows and fields are going to be overtaken.”

At the Kansas City WildLands restoration area in Swope Park, honeysuckle was removed by cutting it down and applying herbicide to the stump and with controlled burns. Once it and other exotics were gone, some native wildflowers re-emerged, and others are being re-introduced.

On the recent workday in the woods, after students from Rockhurst University and the University of Missouri-Kansas City pulled garlic mustard for several hours, Lehrbaum invited them on a tour of the restored glade, a south-facing clearing called Rocky Point Glades.

Tucked among the stones and grasses were columbine, wild hyacinth, phlox, verbena and puccoon.

“This whole area was socked in with honeysuckle,” Lehrbaum told the students as they walked a narrow path through the glade. “The first time we came to this site, we found one wild hyacinth.”

At the end of the garlic mustard workday, the students had filled 43 trash bags. The plants must be discarded, not composted, Lehrbaum noted, to keep seeds from dispersing. The seeds are viable for 10 years.

Carly Santaularia, a Rockhurst student, said she works summers at a golf course and had seen the plant before, although she didn’t know it was detrimental. Last fall she helped at the park site cutting down honeysuckle.

“Looking back at the forest after we were done, you thought, ‘We actually did help out, even if it was only 100 feet by 100 feet,’” she said.

Fellow Rockhurst student Bridgette Pretz had never heard of the garlic mustard threat either — or of garlic mustard — but she felt good seeing the results.

“It’s kind of impressive how a little manpower can do this much,” she said.

HOW TO HELP

Kansas City WildLands, www.kcwildlands.org, needs volunteers for a “Plant the Prairie” ecological restoration workday from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday.

Volunteers will plant some 4,000 wildflower seedlings at three natural areas: Ernie Miller Park remnant prairie in Olathe, Rocky Point Glades in Swope Park and Jerry Smith Park in south Kansas City.

To register and for more information, call Linda Lehrbaum at 816-561-1061, ext. 116, or send e-mail to linda@bridgingthegap.org.

INVADERS

Here’s a sample of some problem exotics, non-native species that spread unchecked. Many biologists and horticulturists include these as invasive species. The common name is followed by the scientific name.

Shrub, bush or Amur honeysuckle : *Lonicera maackii*

Garlic mustard : *Alliaria petiolata*

Sericea lespedeza : *Lespedeza cuneata*

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Winter creeper : *Euonymus fortunei*

Japanese honeysuckle : *Lonicera japonica*

Burning bush : *Euonymus alatus*

Purple loosestrife : *Lythrum salicaria*

Bradford and other callery pear : *Pyrus calleryana* (Above, Bradford pear trees try to crowd out other varieties.)

Teasel, cut-leaved and common : *Dipsacus laciniatus* and *Dipsacus fullonum*

Autumn olive : *Elaeagnus umbellata*

WHAT TO DO AT HOME

1. Don't buy or plant invasive exotic species in your yard. Check our list and go to www.mdc.mo.gov for more on problem plants.
2. Plant native species, which won't harm the ecosystem if they spread. See Powell Gardens' list of invasive exotics and native alternatives at www.powellgardens.org/forms/invasive_plants.pdf.
3. Tell your local nurseries and garden centers not to sell problem exotics.

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