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The View from Laughing Springs: Hans Reimann's ecological notes

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Japanese Knot Weed

We have been very fortunate to live in a pristine watershed that has sustained a large degree of native biodiversity, in spite of three hundred years of negative impact from our taming of the wilderness. But, in the last three decades or so, foreign plants innocently introduced into our watershed, have begun to accelerate their impact on our native ecosystems; outcompeting native plants for habitat. As native plant communities are altered, food available for native insects such as butterflies and bees is lessened. This leads to fewer and fewer native varieties of flora and fauna in our watershed. All up and down the food chain, creatures are adversely affected; from birds who feed on the insects, mammals who eat the seeds and fruits, on down to the microbial creatures living in the soil that break down organic matter into usable nutrients.

These plants that interrupt our native ecosystem's cycle of life, are called invasive plants. One of these plants that can be frequently seen in every watershed around us, but so far rarely in our own, is Japanese Knot Weed. Common names for this plant include: Elephant ear bamboo or Mexican bamboo. This plant can grow upright, hollow stems from three to ten feet high, with smooth-edged heart shaped leaves. Stems are often reddish or red speckled with young shoots looking similar to red asparagus. The small white flowers grow in dense clusters from the leaf joints in July and August. Although it dies back to the ground after hard frosts, the stems may persist through the winter as bare reddish brown stalks. Knot Weed is a creeping perennial, meaning it quickly grows back each year from an extensive rhizome (root) system, up to twenty-five feet from the parent plant. This fact, and the ability of broken roots (from flooding or man made disturbances) to grow new plants independently along riparian or wetland areas, make this plant extremely dangerous to any watershed.

The best mechanical control method is by starving the root system by cutting the plant down to the ground periodically through the growing season over a three-year time frame.

More info on this plant and other invasive plants can be found at the Nature Conservancy website: tncweeds.ucdavis.edu.