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

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Invasive Shrubs

Our federal government defines an invasive species as one “that is not native to the ecosystem under consideration and whose introduction causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.” In the Cooks Creek Watershed region, the native biodiversity of life is increasingly under pressure from biological invaders, as described above. Invasive plant groups can grow more quickly, and high enough to shade out native plants. Bad plants accomplish this by leafing out and flowering earlier while positioning flowers higher to attract pollinators over less conspicuous native flowers. Non-natives, through these and other advantages alter the vertical and horizontal makeup of ecosystems, change hydrology, and interrupt nutrient cycles. The results become apparent as native plant and animal communities come to be fragmented or lost entirely.

The forested and forest edge habitat of our watershed is subject to these plant community “development” pressures. My focus this season is to highlight the native shrub understory layer by listing good native choices to help replace the bad shrubs.

Invasive shrub: Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*)

Native Alternatives:

- 1) New Jersey Tea (*Ceanothus americanus*) Requires planting in moist, sandy or loamy soil under full sun or light shade; drought tolerant upon establishment in the landscape. Mounding to spreading form, growing one to three feet tall, two to four feet wide. Terminal white, flowering clusters in late spring and summer are insect magnets. Deep green foliage and yellow autumn color in open woods and rocky slope habitat.
- 2) Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*) Grows in evenly moist, organic, rich acidic soil, adapting to neutral and slightly alkaline soils, tolerating flooding and dry situations. Reaches four to eight feet tall, wide with white bottle-brush flowers early to mid summer. Landscape interest varies: Sunny location brings vibrant fall colors of crimson, burgundy and purple while shadier planting areas bring autumn colors of orange, gold and scarlet. Mass plantings along stream edges or a tight hedge in beds, borders or slopes are good habitat for this plant.

Invasive shrub: Butterfly bush (*Buddleja davidii*)

Native Alternatives:

1) Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) Once established this plant can easily tolerate moist, riparian conditions and drier landscapes. Growing six to ten feet tall and wide with sweet scented, fuzzy globes of flowers occurring during summer attracting butterflies. Needing full sun to partial shade, showing deep glossy green foliage, yellow autumn color, an attractive winter landscape plant that can be pruned to maintain size.

2) Summersweet, Sweet Pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*) Upright spikes of intensely scented flowers loved by butterflies on a plant that reaches four to eight feet , wide and tall that highlight a plant which blooms best in some direct sun, tolerating brief periods of drought but preferring even moisture. Yellow autumn color with charcoal-gray seeds for decorative winter interest.

Invasive shrub: Russian olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*), Autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*)

Native Alternatives:

1) Silky willow (*Salix sericea*) Reaching six to twelve feet tall and wide, with silvery, lance-shaped leaves on supple stems, this plant adds light and motion to the garden at pond's edge in mass plantings or a screen or single landscape planting. Requires evenly moist, wet, rich soil under full sun to light shade, but tolerates flooding and moderate drought.

2) Witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) An autumn bloomer growing fifteen to twenty feet tall and wide in average to humus-rich, well-drained neutral to acidic soil. Prefers full sun to partial shade with protection from incessant wind. Twisting, spider-like sweet-smelling flowers and broad-oval leaves turning yellow to orange in autumn. Adapts best in evenly moist settings but drought resistant when established.

Thank you for considering native shrubs for your landscape. These and other natives are available at Edge of the Woods native plant nursery and the seasonal sales at Bowman's Hill wild flower preserve.