

WHAT IS A WEED?

Your weed might be my favorite. This is what the dictionary says: a *plant that is not valued where it is growing and is usually of vigorous growth; especially one that tends to overgrow or choke out more desirable plants*. In other words, it's all in the eye of the beholder.

As a gardener who chooses perennials that will naturalize (a tactful way to avoid the term "become invasive") I am the first to believe in live and let live. My favorite plants are hardy and demand constant policing so they don't overstep their bounds. In many cases, if they haven't swamped other plants, I permit them to bloom before pulling some of them out. I like Violets, Chinese Anemones, Hardy Ageratum, Phlox and many others as long as they don't run roughshod over everything else.

However, even I, a relatively permissive gardener have found some down and dirty villains. I don't believe in pesticides, for I have many wild flowers and find they will decimate more than the predetermined "weed". The only exception I make is for poison ivy. So my method is simple, if repetitious and back breaking--pull up and discard. Below are a few villains that have crept into my flower garden.

Honewort (*Cryptotaenia canadensis*), is considered a native plant. While its spray of small white flowers may be thought attractive and some wild flower fanciers may encourage its growth, I have found it to be so vigorous that it's a pest. While Honewort supposedly prefers light to heavy shade, it has migrated to my flower beds in full sun. To add insult to injury, the deer love it. Luckily, it is easy to pull up, especially when the ground is damp. Its sheer quantity that makes this an exhausting task.



Smartweed (*Polygonum hydropiper*), another native, is actually an annual, but since each plant has 3,000 seeds, it absolutely re-appears every year on both the lawn and flower beds. It also attracts plant-eating insects, such as Japanese beetles. Allowed to flourish, it can reach five feet. It's essential to pull the flowers before they go to seed and to bag them before you discard.

Number one on my hate list is **Japanese Stiltgrass** (*Microstegium vimineum*) an annual grass that looks a little like bamboo and is just as voracious. It arrived in Tennessee in 1919, probably as a packing material for an import, and flourishes on lawns and beds. Individual plants carry from 100 to 1,000 seeds. One reference source suggested that manual removal can disturb the soil, which may result in additional germination of Stiltgrass seed. They add that when cut by a lawn mower, these tricky devils will often cleverly reproduce earlier in the season to compensate. Clever. They're saying we can't win! I don't give up. I pull the entire plants and bag the remains so the seeds don't spread.



Oriental Bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*) was introduced into this country in the 1860's for cultivation. It's true that the small round yellow seed pods which open into brilliant red fruits are very attractive as are the curly stems. Although I have a few secret sources to gather in the woods for indoor display, (I am very careful to make sure the seeds are destroyed when I discard them) I say, NIMBY. Not in My Back Yard. This plant grows from New York to North Carolina and westward to Illinois. The vines, which can be four inches thick, swarm over other vegetation and destroy all by strangling and by robbing the plant's sunlight. Native American Bittersweet has been decimated by inter-breeding with this Asian import. To get rid of this pernicious pest, pull or dig vines out by the roots--not always easy--and bag them before disposal if they have berries. You'll know you've got the right plant when you notice



the orange root.

Another vigorous invader from Asia is the **Porcelain-berry** (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*) This very attractive plant, particularly in the variegated form has delightful white and green leaves and will present incredibly blue berries. Originally cultivated in the 1870's, it is still possible to purchase it at nurseries although it is on the Do Not Sell List for Suffolk County. It's such a pretty plant that I actually do keep it in two places--in a pot in a raised urn and at the side of my fish pond. I have not found it appearing elsewhere and I keep track of it, cutting the stems when they seem ready to impinge on other plants. In my mother's garden, I saw it smother a half acre of trees and bushes so despite its charms I am



very careful with it. As a result, I have very few berries.

The last noxious invader is also attractive and sweet smelling when in bloom, but the devil to remove. The thorns are painful. **Wild Rambling Rose** (*Rosa multiflora*) grows prolifically, intertwining amongst the trees, bushes, and fences. When not in bloom, it blocks the sun, can catch the unwary with stray thorned branches, and, in my small garden, must be considered a pest. I have almost given up digging out the roots and instead cut it back early in the season and continuously later. I wear heavy gloves to avoid the thorns

although I always end up with many small scratches.

The Cooperative Extension lists plants banned on Long Island and suggests alternatives. Some of the species listed may surprise you, such as **Sweetautumn Clematis** or **Japanese Virgin's Bower** (*Clematis terniflora*), **Winged Euonymus** or **Burning Bush** (*Euonymus alatus*), **Wintercreeper Euonymus** (*Euonymus fortunei*), **Yellow Flag Iris** (*Iris pseudacorus*), **Bell, Amur, Morrow, and Tartian Shrub Honeysuckle** (*Lonicera x bella*), **Japanese Honeysuckle** (*Lonicera japonica*), **Creeping Jenny or Moneywort** (*Lysmachia nummularia*), and **Purple Loosestrife** (*Lythrum salicaria*). For more information, check out "Invasive Plants" at <http://ccesuffolk.org/gardening/>