

Invaders from the Urban Forest

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Over the years, much has been written and even more said about invasive plant species. This is good. Invasive plants are a real problem that deserves our full attention, because they pose such a threat to Alabama's forests. Landowners and forest managers who neglect invasive plants do so at their own risk. That's why the more we talk about this problem, the better Alabama's forests will be. It's as simple as that.

Much of what we've learned about invasive plants is from a decidedly rural approach – and rightly so. It's the Alabama forest landowner who is on the front lines face-to-face with these aggressors. It makes sense to attack this problem in the battlefields of our forests. But one wonders if this approach will ever result in an acceptable victory, especially when we consider that almost all invasive plants have an urban origin.

Take for example the Chinese tallowtree (*Sapium sebiferum*). Its history over time gives us useful clues about the nature of invasive plants that hold true today. Reportedly, Benjamin Franklin himself in 1776 brought this exotic Asian tree to Colonial America. It's claimed that he saw the tree's seed oil as a potential source for candle and soap making. That was the first mistake. We often look at a plant's single attribute as a reason for experimentation, without being aware of its many unknown features that can come back to haunt us. In this case it did.

Over a two-century period, the Chinese tallowtree quickly naturalized and spread along the Atlantic and Gulf Coast regions. We've now learned that this "introduced" tree species is a highly successful colonizer that can squeeze out entire native plant ecosystems during regeneration. This is one Asian import that everyone wishes we could send back home.

To add insult to injury, the Chinese tallowtree's brilliant fall color made it a favorite urban tree. At one time, you could even

buy it at local nurseries! Ironically, homeowners in many Southern cities still plant and maintain Chinese tallowtrees, while landowners and forest managers struggle to eradicate the invader.

Unfortunately, there are other cases of good intentions gone awry. And the list is growing. Numbers of exotic plants brought to this country for good purposes have now become invaders of our forests. These include Tree-of-heaven, princess-tree, chinaberry, and Russian olive. With a legacy of our past deeds contributing to today's invasive plant problem, one can only imagine what other exotics we are planting in our urban landscape now that will become tomorrow's invasive plant.

So, what does all this mean for Alabama's landowner and forest manager? Simply put, it means you may win a battle against invasive plants, but you can still lose the war. Ultimate success will depend on attacking the invasive plant problem at multiple fronts, including the urban forest. So far, an effective urban forest approach has not been taken. The good news is that it is not too late.

Opening an Urban Front

Taking the invasive plant fight to urban Alabama will not happen unless there is a change in public attitude. Landowners and forest managers are essential in helping communities see that invasive plants are a problem for Alabama's rural and urban forest. By making invasive plants a common enemy, an opportunity occurs for better coordination of rural and urban resources. This could make a genuine difference.

The key is education. Most Alabama homeowners simply are not aware that this is a problem. And if they don't know it's a problem, then we can't count on their support. That's why the message must help urban audiences see invasive plants as a

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Many of today's invasive trees were once popularly planted in Alabama cities. Educational activities can help citizens plant tree species that will not become tomorrow's invasive plant.



In Alabama, 46 communities employ city foresters to manage their urban forests. These professionals have the expertise to make invasive plants a part of their urban forest management program.

problem that affects them, and gives them a reason to join the fight. This will require landowners, forest managers, researchers, and other natural resource experts to take the invasive plant message to Alabama's cities and towns. What they already know about the problem in Alabama's rural forest has application in the urban forest.

Luckily, conditions are ripe to make this happen. A 2003 Auburn University study found that a high percentage of Alabama urban adults want trees in their communities *and* are receptive to information that will help them better care for their trees. This finding supports a strategy to educate urban homeowners about invasive plants.

However, an educational campaign targeting Alabama's urban public will need to go beyond just awareness. It must also give homeowners tools they can use to fight the problem, such as removing invasive trees from their home landscape. With enough time, there would be an almost immediate impact on the statewide effort. It would bring into action thousands of individual citizens actively working to reduce invasive plants on their own. It would also create a network of on-the-ground eyes ready to spot new and emerging exotic plants before they become problems for the forest.

Alabama local governments make up the second audience in this important educational strategy, because they make decisions and adopt policies that influence a much larger landscape than single homeowners. Fortunately, most Alabama towns and cities are building programs to better manage their urban forests. Communities are hiring urban foresters, budgeting money, implementing sophisticated management programs, and

working with large numbers of volunteer citizens. These municipal resources and capacities could have a huge impact on the invasive plant problem if effectively directed at the urban forest front.

There will be a key difference in an invasive plant message targeting local governments. Unlike for homeowners, this message will need to be more technical and highly developed. That's because there are great similarities in how local governments would address invasive plants as compared with traditional forest landowners. Both approaches involve a professional forest management perspective. A good invasive plant message will help local governments adapt their urban forest management programs to effectively complement rural initiatives.

What Can I Do?

If Alabama is to succeed in its battle with invasive plants, there must be an urban forest component. But with most things, nothing just happens. It takes people with vision, purpose, and a cause to work with others toward a common goal. In this case, that duty will fall on Alabama's landowners, forest managers, researchers, and other natural resource professionals. They will need to see that it is in their interest to go into Alabama communities and build relationships around solving the invasive plant issue. The good news is that Alabama communities are receptive to this message. 🌳



Alabama citizens and communities have great pride in their urban forests. Tapping into this personal value can broaden the invasive species fight to our cities and towns.