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New Resource Untangles Invasive Trees, Shrubs and Woody Vines (Oh my!)

- **Lisle, Illinois, July 6, 2020** - Green is good, right? Well...maybe not all the time. When walking in a local park, forest preserve or conservation land, a popular quarantine-approved activity, many people tend to think of a lush tangle of shrubs and vines as a sign of good health. There's more to the picture says Clair Ryan, Coordinator of the [Midwest Invasive Plant Network](#) and the new [Woody Invasives of the Great Lakes \(WIGL\) Collaborative](#). "Often, especially near urban and developed areas, forests and other natural areas are clogged with invasive woody species that damage wildlife habitat, block trail access, and harbor larger populations of ticks that spread disease to humans," says Ryan. "We developed the WIGL Collaborative website to help people learn to identify the woody invasive plants around them and to feel empowered to start controlling them on their properties or in their favorite green places."

The website, [woodyinvasives.org](#), contains a wealth of information about how to tell woody invasive species apart from similar beneficial plants, an interactive map showing how these species are regulated by Great Lakes jurisdictions, detailed management approaches, and non-invasive woody plant ideas for gardeners and landscape designers. Invasive trees, shrubs, and woody vines pose a serious threat to natural areas in the Great Lakes region, out-competing native plants and damaging wildlife habitat. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Great Lakes region is particularly vulnerable to invasive species due to its status as a global transportation hub. Species that live directly in the water like zebra mussels and common reed often get the most attention, which is understandable. However, Ryan says that it is important not to forget about land-based species. "The Great Lakes watershed, much of which is forested, provides water to the lakes. If the forests aren't healthy, it will be very difficult for the lakes to be healthy."

The current problem has actually been a long time in the making. Most of the region's most common invasive woodies such as buckthorn, autumn olive, and bush honeysuckle, were brought to North America hundreds of years ago, either as ornamental garden plants or for erosion control. The concept of species invasiveness was not developed until relatively recently, during the second half of the twentieth century. The majority of problem woody species, including those just mentioned, are spread by birds that eat the fruit. Over generations, seeds can reach even relatively pristine natural habitats. Their toughness and adaptability to less-than-ideal conditions often allow invasives to out-compete native species that would grow in similar habitats.

The majority of the woody invasive species explored by the WIGL collaborative have fallen out of trade by nurseries and garden centers both due to regulation and to changes in green industry culture. However, there are some invasive species that are still popular in trade. "Callery pear, also known by a number of trade names, Japanese barberry and winged burning bush are all still available from just about every big box store in states where they are legal to be sold," laments Ryan. "That's one thing everyone can do today to help: don't plant species that are proving to be invasive in your area, and if you already have them, replace them. There are so many beautiful and non-invasive plants available, many of which are native and benefit pollinators."

The WIGL Collaborative joins several other regional invasive species collaboratives funded through the [Great Lakes Restoration Initiative](#) (GLRI), a federally funded public sector partnership with broad bi-partisan support. The very first GLRI collaborative focused on common reed, also known as Phragmites. In addition to WIGL, other members of the new class of collaboratives focus on New Zealand mud snails, invasive crayfish, and the macro-algae starry stonewort. These collaboratives bring scientists, managers, business representatives and others together from across the region to prevent the spread and improve management of invasive species.

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