

INVASIVE WEED OF THE MONTH

Oriental bittersweet: Protect your trees from a bitter end

From Brodhead Watershed Association



Photo cutline: In spite of its attractive fall berries with their yellow covering, Oriental bittersweet (Celastrus orbiculatus) is an aggressive invasive vine that kills the trees it climbs. (Dave Jackson/Penn State Extension photo)

Like so many plants that became pests, oriental bittersweet was intentionally introduced in the 1860s in the U.S. — another proof, if we need it, that messing with Mother Nature rarely works out how we expect!

In the case of bittersweet, the consequences are serious. The vines are extremely aggressive. With one root capable of producing many vines, bittersweet quickly grows into the canopy of that prize oak, hickory or ornamental tree in your yard and chokes them to death, smothering them in heavy billows of foliage.

If smothering a tree's canopy isn't enough, bittersweet is well known for strangling even very large, healthy trees — a process known as "girdling" — with a criss-cross chokehold of vines.

IDENTIFYING THE INVASIVE

You can easily tell our native, non-aggressive bittersweet from the invader. American bittersweet looks quite similar, but it's rare and even considered vulnerable in some states. Its leaves are shaped like a football, rather than round. Their flowers and fruits show only at the ends of the stems. And the fruit of American bittersweet has a

bright red covering, rather than the yellow of the invader. The fruit of both vines is red.

HOW TO CONTROL INVASIVE BITTERSWEET

First, don't buy it or let a landscaper plant it for you!

But if you have one, the first step is to get rid of the weight of the aerial part of the vine. Cut the vine off at ground level, then also at eye-level. Don't try to pull the growth from the tree — that may well damage it more. Let it dry and shed its leaves, and the weight will no longer be a problem. The dead vine itself will soon decompose.

Oriental bittersweet is a prolific sprouter, so the second step is to attack the root system. One way is to keep cutting the regrowth until the root is exhausted. It's most effective, though, to watch for the regrowth and wait about two months. Spray a mixture of glyphosate and water-based triclopyr with a surfactant added on the established foliage (around here, from July 1 through the end of September).

If you have a tree that is being girdled, take a "hack and squirt" approach. You'll find details at <https://extension.psu.edu/oriental-bittersweet>.

More on invasive plants can be found at

<https://brodheadwatershed.org/common-invasive-plants-chart/>