

Don't Plant "Virginia's Least Wanted"

By Susan Camp

A poster titled "Virginia's Least Wanted" on a recent Facebook page showed color photos of eight non-native plants that are included at some level on the current Virginia Invasive Plant Species List published by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. The poster was produced by Blue Ridge Prism, a non-profit organization working to reduce invasive species in the northern Blue Ridge.

It is important to remember that not all introduced plant species pose a threat to our native plants and wildlife. Not every European or Asian species will overtake and displace native plants, but most non-native plants will not supply the same level of nutritional and habitat support as native plants.

Problems arise when property owners and developers deliberately or unknowingly plant invasive species and allow them to escape into the surrounding environment where they take over and crowd out native flora.

In 1960, my parents bought a new house in a newly completed development in Hampton. The builders were kind enough to seed the sandy lot that had been denuded of any healthy soil, and they planted an evergreen shrub next to the front steps. That shrub was *Ligustrum sinense* (Chinese privet). It grew to be about 12 feet tall by the time my dad sold the house in 1985. Every spring, tiny white flowers bloomed. They smelled awful, and made my mother sneeze.

Last spring, I smelled that unpleasant odor in our woods. Jim found a small thicket of privet shrubs and cut them down. Birds will eat the purple drupes and deposit the seeds wherever they please. *L. sinense* is rated "High" on the VA Invasive Plant Species list.

If you have Chinese privet, remove it and plant something native, like lovely mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*— even the name is pretty) with its dainty pink and white blossoms that remind me of calico fabric.

You can also substitute our native wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera* or *Morella cerifera*). Several species exist under either genus, but all have similar features: waxy evergreen leaves and tiny blue berries with the familiar bayberry fragrance.

Vinca minor (periwinkle) is an attractive evergreen vine with leathery, dark green leaves and pretty lavender-blue flowers in spring and summer. *Vinca minor* attracts bumblebees, but this European native is an aggressive spreader that grows quickly to form a dense mat that is difficult to control or remove. We have a large patch on a shallow bank on one side of the house that we have never quite eradicated. *Vinca minor* and its cousin, *Vinca major* from Asia Minor, rate "Low" on the invasiveness list, but require attention because they can spread so quickly and crowd out natives.

Plant wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*) instead of *Vinca minor* as an attractive groundcover. Wild strawberry bears dainty white flowers and edible red berries. It is winter hardy, but may go dormant in the summer heat. It will revive when temperatures begin to drop.

Chrysogonum virginianum (green and gold) is a shade-loving perennial that spreads by rhizomes and reaches a height of one to two feet. Bright green leaves are accented by tiny, bright-yellow flowers. It is easy to control.

Our third “Least Wanted” invader is yellow flag iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), native to Eurasia and Africa. It is rated “High” on the invasiveness list, but often planted at pond edges and along streams and creeks. It spreads by seed and rhizomes and can quickly choke out native flora. Unlike most other iris species, it thrives in wet or boggy areas.

Replace yellow flag iris with *Iris virginica* (southern blue flag iris) or *Asclepias incarnata* (swamp milkweed). Beautiful blue flag iris will grow in wet or boggy soil. It spreads slowly by rhizomes, and clumps can be lifted and separated every few years. Pink or rosy-purple flowered swamp milkweed thrives in boggy areas and is a food source for Monarch caterpillars.

See NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox for entries on these and other native and non-native perennials, trees, shrubs, and vines.