Four Cooperative Weed Management Areas in Illinois spring up to battle botanical invaders.

Department of Natural Resources Natural Heritage Biologist Jody Shimp removes first-year growth of invasive garlic mustard plants in Jackson County.

The Weed Warriors

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

Most of us could easily spot an exotic animal—a giraffe, for example—if we saw one strolling around Illinois. But what about plants? How many of us could instantly recognize a non-native plant growing in Illinois?

And, perhaps most importantly, why should we bother? What's the harm in a foreign plant growing in a ditch along a Chicago expressway, or in a distant forest in southern Illinois?

There is a compelling reason, it turns out. Nothing less than our local food supply is at stake. What's more, the encroachment of non-native plants into our Illinois landscape disrupts the ability of our land to feed and support native wildlife—animals that depend on specific native plants for habitat and food.

Bush honeysuckle (Photo by Adele Hodde.)

If ordinary "weeds" are a nuisance to backyard gardeners, exotic weeds and their aggressive encroachment represent potential catastrophe to Illinois farmers. Imagine a hard-to-eradicate plant competing with soybeans, hosting dreaded soybean rust and thereby threatening Illinois' soybean crop.

Ever hear of kudzu—the plant that ate the South?

"Kudzu is the closest living relative to soybeans. In fact, [it] used to be in the same genus," explained Jody Shimp, a botanist with the Department of Natural Resources, which is one partner in an emerging, nationwide pro-

River-to-River Cooperative Weed Management Area Coordinator Chris Evans is targeting the aggressive invasive Oriental bittersweet in southern Illinois.

gram to combat invasive, exotic plants in various regions of the United States, including Illinois.

Shimp, who identified kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*) in a remote portion of the Shawnee National Forest in 1994, represents DNR in the new, River to River Cooperative Weed Management Area, a multi-agency, public-private partnership comprising 11 southern Illinois counties linked together under a common mission: eradicate or control the spread of dangerously invasive plants. It's one of four Cooperative Weed Management Areas in Illinois.

Tapping into the old adage of strength in numbers, when seemingly unrelated agencies such as the Department of Transportation and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service get together to identify and attack colonies of invasive plants spreading across their lands—regardless of property lines—real progress can be made.

"I think it's the best approach that I've seen," Shimp announced, adding that individual efforts to halt the spread of exotics sometimes defeat themselves through isolation. "It's a coordinated, multi-agency effort, and that really helps, especially in this area where you have so many land agencies."

Overseeing the entire southern Illinois effort is Chris Evans, a full-time CWMA coordinator who tracks down populations of dangerously invasive plants, fields calls from concerned landowners and helps facilitate technical and financial assistance for attacking the invasive plants on both public and private property.

"The reason for the individual Cooperative Weed Management Areas in Illinois is to target specific plants and their habitats," Evans said, explaining that the each of the 11 counties of the River to River CWMA "are ecologically similar to the others." Southern Illinois has unique flora compared with other areas of the state, and vice versa.

In Lake and McHenry counties, one of the four CWMAs in Illinois, rapid detection of new invaders is a basic goal. One of the high-priority plants being targeted is leafy spurge, a toxic prairie invader that represents a dual threat to agriculture: Since livestock

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

The wetland-dominating invader known as Phragmites (left) offers almost no benefit to Illinois wildlife. Leafy spurge (below) is a high-priority target in northeastern Illinois counties.

Want to learn more about Cooperative Weed Management Area assistance in Illinois? In the 11 southern Illinois counties contact Chris Evans at (618) 998-5920. In Lake and McHenry Counties, contact Debbie Maurer of the Lake County Forest Preserve District at (847) 968-3285. Elsewhere in Illinois, contact Ben Dolbeare of the Department of Natural Resources at (217) 785-8688.

will avoid grazing it, the plant easily proliferates and spreads in pastures thereby giving it a competitive edge over native forage. It's already a huge problem in western states, and the battle being waged in northeastern Illinois is intended to zap leafy spurge before the battle becomes impossible to win.

In the River to River CWMA, plants such as kudzu are considered of critical importance to attack since their spread can be averted through early intervention. The U.S. Department of Agriculture—one of the partners in the CWMA battle—recently proposed a plan to target increasing colonies of invasive plants within the Shawnee National Forest, including the kudzu patch Shimp noticed in 1994.

Land managers believe that other invasive plants, including autumn olive, multiflora rose and Japanese honeysuckle, are too widespread to attack with similar zeal.

Yet many battles against invasive exotics can be won. And a big part of that effort depends upon raising awareness about the technical and financial assistance available to confront aggressive weeds on both public and private lands. Federal grants, administered through the nonprofit National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, can be delivered to landowners to procure equipment and chemicals to battle invasives on their property.

Part of the CWMA mission is to inform the public about the availability of such assistance.

"A lot of what we try to do includes educational programs, workshops and field days for landowners through groups such as soil and water conservation districts," Evans reports. "Most of the major land management agencies are on board. Now we're trying to get the local city governments, the park districts on board."

A herbicide injector purchased with federal grant monies is being tested as an alternative to cutting invasives such as thick Oriental bittersweet vines.

Teasel

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Boot brushes (left) installed at trail heads help prevent the spread of seeds—such as invasive teasel (above)—embedded in hiker's shoes.

Ultimately, no additional exotic plants will overrun Illinois. And those "lost battles" will never truly be lost.

"Realistically we'll never be able to eradicate (all exotics) completely," Evans explained. "But we will be able to keep them in control."

Late breaking news

The Cooperative Weed Management Area was recently awarded a Pulling Together Initiative grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for $37,000. Monies will be used to start an equipment bank of tools necessary to fight invasives and make them available for loan to any state park, agency, organization or volunteer effort to make work days more efficient. In addition, two PDA/GPS combinations will be purchased, and available for loan for collecting distribution data on invasives.