

Buckthorn: The Silent Killer

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It's out there. Invading your backyards. Creeping along the forest bottom. Conquering the Midwest inch by inch. Wreaking havoc wherever it crops up. I myself have engaged it in battle countless times. That's right. Buckthorn.

So, you might think I'm up a tree for being so concerned about this shrub. It's just a plant in the forest, right? The fact is that buckthorn is having a huge impact on the growth and diversity of Midwestern forests.

To the inexperienced eye, buckthorn might look like any other spindly plant. Accepting this as true, however, would be barking up the wrong tree. Literally. Buckthorn is not a tree, classified instead as a tall shrub. *Rhamnus frangula* and *rhamnus cathartica* are the species of buckthorn that most commonly appear in the Midwest.

Buckthorn is an invasive species. Non-native to the United States, it grows naturally in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Buckthorn was first introduced in the US in the 1800's as an ornamental shrub for gardens. But it wouldn't let itself be hedged in, aggressively invading Midwestern wetlands and forests for 200 years after.

There are many reasons why buckthorn is so detrimental. It can grow in virtually any area it is dispersed in, but it grows particularly fast in moist fertile soil, which is so common in this area. Buckthorn grows in dense patches, and the plants generally have low hanging branches, causing light blockage to the ground. This, in turn, inhibits the growth of native plants, especially tree seedlings, which need lots of light to develop. Because it is non-native, buckthorn lacks natural controls, such as insects or diseases that would commonly curb its growth.

Buckthorn has become such a problem that under the Illinois Exotic Weed Act, it is a Class B misdemeanor to buy, sell or plant it in Illinois.

The buckthorn problem is so widespread that it will not be solved just by tearing down a couple of patches of it. The fight against buckthorn is comprised in equal parts of elimination and conservation. Eliminate as much buckthorn as you can while conserving and encouraging the growth of native trees. The reason buckthorn is so invasive is because it grows much faster

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than the oaks or elms in the area. These native trees need sunlight, room to grow, and time. Buckthorn affects native trees at all stages. It covers seedlings and blocks out sunlight; it takes soil space away from growing and established trees. It's time to weed out buckthorn for good, before it takes over our forests.