

Amur Honeysuckle

The Ecology of Invasive Species

By Warren Uxley

Early November and the skies are a sullen gray and the landscape is dominated by muted, lifeless browns. The only greens to be found are on neatly manicured lawns, recently mown roadsides and, most disturbingly, the unruly form of the Amur honeysuckle now adds its own verdure to late fall.

Named after the Amur river in the far eastern part of Siberia where it is native, this species of bush honeysuckle has spread like a plague across much of eastern North America. Originally imported into the U.S. in 1896 as an ornamental plant, it escaped cultivation and is now reproducing at a phenomenal rate.

During the month of November the true extent of the infestation is most obvious as it is frequently the only green plant in our woodlands, fields and, most significantly, our river bottoms. Many sections of both the Olentangy and Sandusky rivers are lined with this highly invasive non-native shrub – the lime-green color, glazed with the bright red of the fruits, is unmistakable. It's truly a shocking thing to behold.

Among the first plants to leaf out in the spring and the last to drop its leaves in the fall, the Amur honeysuckle has one of the longest growing seasons of any plant in our area and can quickly out compete our native plants. Once established, it has an immediate adverse effect on the dynamics of our native plant communities. The enveloping honeysuckles curtail native seedling establishment and subsequent growth. Our native plants are simply unable to deal with this new competitor.

By mid-November the leaves of Amur honeysuckle finally turn yellow and begin to drop; the scarlet fruits are then left naked on the branches. A mature Amur honeysuckle can produce several pounds of fruits and the birds are quick to take advantage. It is not uncommon to find a flock of twenty or more robins greedily gorging themselves on the fleshy, red globes.

Of course the plant counts on this. The engorged robins are on the move in November and they proceed to crap the seeds throughout the countryside as they prepare for and begin their migration. It's no small irony that it is our native birds that are the primary vector for this cancerous non-native scourge.

After the robins have departed for the winter there are still plenty of fruits on the bushes, but unfortunately the remaining fruit does not go to waste. During a recent Christmas bird count a flock of fifty cedar waxwings was observed feasting on honeysuckle fruit along the Olentangy river.

Cedar waxwings normally have a bright yellow band at the base of their tails. Over the last few years many waxwings have been found with sections of their tail bands that are red-orange in color. It is suspected that the color change is the result of the extensive consumption of the red fruits of non-native honeysuckles.

In addition to the Amur honeysuckle, the Tartarian and Morrow's honeysuckles have also gained a foothold in our area. If this were not enough, the autumn olive – a small non-native tree that also produces bright red fruit – has also become a major threat.

All of these troublesome plants would never have become a problem if people had chosen to use native plants in their landscaping projects. Many native viburnums have the same qualities as the non-natives mentioned here and make excellent landscape choices.

The next time you want to plant a tree or shrub, consider going native.