

## Seeing the Sourlands



*Japanese Honeysuckle*

### **Alien Invasive Plants by Jim Amon**

In the early 20th century Japanese porcelains that were sent to the United States were packed with a local product, stiltgrass. When the porcelains were removed from the box the stiltgrass was d thrown away. Today it blankets the forest floor of the Sourlands, making it difficult for native grasses, sedges and ferns to find enough sunlight and nutrients to survive.

At about the same time the US Department of Agriculture viewed Multiflora rose as potentially a "living fence." Throughout much of the 20th century farmers were urged to plant it along the boundaries of their fields because it would stop erosion, provide habitat for wildlife and never need mending--all things that barbed wire does not do. The rose soon began spreading into the fields, and today it is often a dense thicket in our fields and woodlands, choking native shrubs and understory trees that have less aggressive propagation abilities.

Japanese honeysuckle, brought to America by nurseries who promoted it for its pretty flowers, sweet aroma and aggressive growth as a ground cover, now also blankets much of the natural world in eastern America, sometimes entwining Multiflora rose or crowding out stilt grass. (That situation always gives me pleasure; the battle between two enemies. Who do you root for?)

Honeysuckle climbs its hosts by encircling them. (Our native vines, like Virginia creeper, grape and poison ivy, climb their host by attaching tendrils to it.) The encirclement sometimes becomes a choke hold by preventing the flow of nutrients and sugars from crown to root and vice versa.

Japanese barberry not only creates a dense shade that robs the spring-blooming woodland wildflowers of habitat but it even turns the chemistry of the soil around it from acidic to neutral (Our forest plants need an acidic soil.) Autumn olive is another dense grower that can rapidly colonize an open area, outcompeting native trees and shrubs for habitat. The list goes on. In fact a non-profit environmental group called "The New Jersey Invasive Spices Strike Team" has formed with the goal of informing people about invasive plants and helping prevent their spread. (Now there is a tee shirt that I wear with pride!)

Decrying alien invasive species may sound like a form of xenophobia, a kind of vegetative Muslim ban. But the life of our native landscape is at stake.

By crowding out and killing scores of native plants, a handful of invasives is reducing biodiversity and thereby threatening the health and even the very life of our native landscape. Many of the invasives are beautiful but the native landscape is more than just beautiful, it is the basis for life. The fewer the number of species in an ecosystem, the less able it is to survive a disaster to any one of them. When a pathogen wiped out the American chestnut tree in the late 19th and early 20th century our forests rebounded because there were oaks, maples, hickories, ashes, elms and many other species to fill the void.

Further, the assent of alien invasive plants threatens the insects, birds and mammals of our region. A walk in the woods in autumn dramatically reveals the problem. Virtually every leaf of every native plant has holes in it from insect visitors, but the alien plants retain perfect leaves. The native insects evolved over hundreds of thousands of years with the biota of the region and these plant newcomers are not palatable to them. No insects, no birds. Even the Whitetail deer--who seem to be voracious eaters--seldom eat invasive plants. Instead, they eat the native shrubs and tree seedlings, leaving open space for the invasives to colonize.

Home gardeners have an opportunity to do something important. By choosing native trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants for their gardens they can reduce the source for alien invasive plants in the natural landscape and provide food and shelter to the insects, birds and mammals that bring that landscape to life.