

What to Know about Invasive Plant Removal

By Mark Hooker, Newton Conservators' member and avid invasives fighter

Sometimes I wish I could go back the ten or so years to before my obsession with invasive plants began. I used to be able to enjoy natural areas and think they were, more or less, “as they should be.” But at some point around 2008, I became more like a proofreader who sees only typos, subconsciously scanning open spaces for “creeper vines.”

At first, my objections were primarily aesthetic, but I gradually learned more about the plants and the damage that they do: how garlic mustard effectively poisons the soil against competing species, how black swallowwort attracts monarch butterflies, but does not allow their caterpillars to survive, and how porcelainberry and Asian bittersweet strangle plants and trees and create a canopy that smothers and kills native host plants. These effects are terrible in their own right, but also have ripple effects that destabilize the whole ecosystem and food chain.

Indeed, at times it seems that invasive plants are an unstoppable force that will, before long, envelop every natural area and bury them alive. However, there is good news as well: serious progress has been made in a number of Newton's open spaces, and the persistent efforts of Conservators, commercial and residential abutters, and other good citizens can have material progress with many natural habitats, to the benefit of native species and human visitors alike.

In this article I'd like to highlight two such areas, the Upper Falls Greenway and Cold Spring Park.

As described in a recent Conservators' newsletter article (Summer 2017), the Upper Falls Greenway has progressed from an abandoned rail line that was used as a dump and



PHOTO: MARK HOOKER

Benjamin Mills Park in Wellesley with porcelainberry and bittersweet on the left, creating a canopy over maple and beech trees.



PHOTO: CREATIVE COMMONS AMPELOPSIS-BREVIPELUNCULATA

Porcelainberry Closeup

completely overgrown with Asian bittersweet, porcelainberry, garlic mustard, and Japanese knotweed (among other invasives) in 2011 to a maintained, more than mile-long gravel path, that is heavily used and enjoyed by dog walkers, joggers, Needham Street employees, and various other neighbors. The bittersweet and porcelainberry have been cut back to a small fraction of their original dominance, although continued efforts are required to bring the garlic mustard and knotweed under control.

Cold Spring Park has a wide range of habitat, from swamps and vernal pools that are largely free of people to playing fields and a dog park that support sizable human use. As of a couple of years ago, the park was heavily infested with the usual suspects — bittersweet, porcelainberry, garlic mustard, knotweed, and buckthorn. Again,

concerted efforts both freelance and organized (principally Conservators' pull sessions led by Katherine Howard and Eric Olson's buckthorn demonstration project) have dramatically reduced the invasives.

The Conservators organizes invasive removal sessions at several sites each year, and is actively looking for help. For those interested in group or individual efforts, here are a few helpful notes and suggestions. First, it often takes several

Continued on page 6



PHOTO: MARK HOOKER

Bittersweet vines



PHOTO: BETH WILKINSON

Black Swallow-wort



PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA CREATIVE COMMONS

Garlic Mustard



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Eric Olson with a Tree of Heaven

years of repeated efforts, in part because of natural cycles like the flowering of garlic mustard, and the general tenacity of the plants in regeneration. However, multi-year efforts absolutely work, and the Greenway and Cold Spring Park as well as other areas demonstrate the effectiveness of persistence.

Second, there are important seasonal factors. Garlic mustard has a window of vulnerability; it must be pulled in the spring after the ground softens and the plant has regrown, but before the flowers open and seeds are scattered. Similarly,

knotweed and swallow-wort must be removed when the ground is soft because they spread through roots, and it is important to remove swallow-wort before its seed pods open in the late summer. By contrast, late fall and winter are opportune times to cut porcelainberry and bittersweet vines since the poison ivy that often surrounds them has died back enough to allow better access. (Young vines may be pulled out of the ground with roots, but mature porcelainberry and bittersweet can have trunks six inches or thicker with roots nearly impossible to remove). ♦



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