

COLUMNS

How to fight invasive plants and pests that threaten landscapes

Campbell Vaughn Augusta Chronicle

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Change is inevitable; sometimes for the good, and sometimes it brings big challenges.

Our native landscapes are full of wonderful specimens that create ecosystems that interact well together. When we disturb these landscapes, intentionally or unintentionally, problems often arise.

As a county extension agent for the University of Georgia, I am often asked about unusual plants, insects, and animals appearing in local landscapes. Many of these visitors share a commonality: They are invasive species.

While not every non-native organism is harmful, invasive species can cause significant damage to our environment, economy, and quality of life.

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An invasive species is a plant, insect, animal, or pathogen that is not native to an area and causes harm when introduced. These species often spread rapidly because they arrive without the natural predators, diseases, or environmental controls that would normally keep them in check in their natural habitats.

The Southeast has its share of invasive species challenges. Some are highly visible, while others quietly alter natural ecosystems over many years. Understanding what invasive species are and how they spread is the first step in protecting our landscapes and natural resources.

An invasive plant that is probably the most visible in the South is kudzu. Also known as the “vine that ate the south”, kudzu was originally brought to the U.S. as a novelty plant for the 1876 World’s Fair in Philadelphia. It didn’t have a lot of use in agriculture, so it was not actively grown.

In 1935, as dust storms damaged the prairies and fallow cotton fields were washing into creeks and streams, Congress declared war on soil erosion and enlisted kudzu as a primary weapon.

More than 70 million kudzu seedlings were grown in nurseries by the newly created Soil Conservation Service. The SCS offered as much as \$8 per acre to anyone willing to plant the vine, which was a decent sum in those days.

By 1945, more than a million acres of kudzu had been planted. And then we learned that this deciduous vine not only could cover a field horizontally, but it was also capable of growing 100 feet vertically. In ideal conditions, kudzu can grow 12 inches each day, and the roots can reach depths of 16 feet.

Talk about opening a can of worms.

Since kudzu was used for erosion, steep banks were often the ideal place to plant this aggressive vine. Constant mowing is an effective control method in flatter areas, but is next to impossible on heavy grade inclines.

Cows love kudzu as a healthy forage, but just like mowing equipment, bovines don't do well on steep banks. Kudzu doesn't strangle plants as the myth says, but actually shades everything it covers to death.

Invasive insects have also become major concerns.

The emerald ash borer, a metallic green beetle from Asia, has killed millions of ash trees across North America. Since its discovery in Georgia, ash trees in both urban and rural settings have been at risk. Once infested, untreated trees typically die within a few years.

Aquatic invasive species can be equally destructive.

Hydrilla, an aggressive aquatic plant, forms dense mats in lakes and ponds that interfere with recreation, fishing, and water flow.

Hydrilla carries a dangerous, sometimes deadly, pathogen to bald eagles. The eagles often die soon after eating a fish that nibbled on hydrilla due to a brain disease initially caused by the plant. In some water bodies, management costs can reach thousands of dollars annually.

Many invasive species arrive unintentionally through international trade, shipping materials, nursery stock, firewood movement, and even online plant purchases.

Others were intentionally introduced as ornamental plants, livestock forage, or erosion-control materials before their invasive potential was understood. Fire ants arrived in the U.S. in soil used for ballast material in

1918 from an Argentine ship that landed in Mobile, Alabama.

What can we do as citizens to prevent the spread of invasive species?

The biggest one is learning to identify common invasive plants and insects in your area. Numerous resources are available through extension offices, state agencies, and university websites. If you encounter an unfamiliar pest or plant, take clear photographs and contact your local extension office for assistance. We can help you find a solution to mitigate some of these invasives.

Another big way to help is to avoid planting known invasive ornamentals. Many attractive native alternatives provide similar landscape benefits while supporting local wildlife and pollinators.

Native plants are generally better adapted to local growing conditions and often require fewer inputs once established. The more we know about invasive species and how to fight them, the better our home habitats will be.

