

COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: Hurricane Helene did serious damage to the land. These plants can help it heal.

Campbell Vaughn Augusta Chronicle

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Pioneer species, such as American burnweed, are the first plants to appear in disturbed areas, helping to cover the soil and prevent erosion.

American burnweed, a native plant, thrives in disturbed areas, grows quickly, and provides a nectar source for pollinators.

Other pioneer species like winged elms and pines help stabilize the soil with their fast-growing root systems.

In landscape architecture school, our curriculum had plenty of ecology-based material. These environmental studies obviously coincide with many of the aspects that landscape architects try to achieve with their designs and long-term plans for the land.

The subject of natural land succession always interested me because if you know what you are looking for, you can watch it happen.

I would love to write deeply into this material because it explains why nature does what it does after the land has been disturbed. And after a year of the beating Helene did to our landscape environment, watching how the land has been trying to heal itself over the past year has been like taking an in-the-field course from back in the days at UGA LAR.

Campbell Vaughn: [It's time to be a scientist for two days by taking part in pollinator census](#)

Weeds are one of the most discussed subjects in our office all year. I have said this gazillion times over the years, “When there is bare soil in the landscape, God is going to put a seed there.” He has a system, and it is how he keeps soil in the Southeast vegetated.

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Not only did Helene disturb the soil in a major way, but the endless Bobcats, truck tires, excavators, stump grinders, cranes, and countless large trees strewn around all but destroyed our landscape. When the dust had mostly settled about time for us to host a golf tournament, the signs of the land trying to find a way to rebuild itself were beginning to surface.

The process of the land healing itself after it has been previously vegetated is called “secondary succession”. Common occurrences that lead to a secondary succession would be floods, fires, tornadoes, and, in our case, that wretched Helene. The term succession is well used because the process happens in steps, and each step has a purpose.

The first line of defense for disturbed land is to cover the soil quickly to avoid erosion. Plants whose seeds germinate quickly appear first. This will consist of grasses, annual and perennial flowering plants, and some minor trees and shrubs. Sweetgums, winged elms, and pines are some of the first trees you will see because they grow fast and spread their root systems quickly to stabilize the soil.

We call these first to arrive at the party plants “pioneer species”. This is the type of vegetation that is meant to exploit that disturbed land and build an improved environment so that longer-term plants can follow.

One of the more interesting (and noticeable) plants/weeds that are following this succession plan is American burnweed. It would be hard to count how many people have asked me why this giant weed that they have never seen before is all over town. It is a native and is a fantastic example of a pioneer species.

Burnweed thrives in newly disturbed land that might have difficulty growing other plants. With the opening of sunlight where it may have never been shaded for years, burnweed grows fast and can very quickly reach 8 to 10 feet.

The plant masses will fill in a large area in a hurry, almost like a small jungle. The stalks are very strong, and they stay upright. Although they are not the type of plant you want in your landscape, they epitomize the “pioneer species” mantra.

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Large disturbances like we had last September can vastly reduce food sources for wildlife. American burnweed is a late summer/early fall bloomer that is a great nectar source for pollinators. Not only does American burnweed grow fast and stabilize the soil, but it is also a plant that assimilates nitrogen out of the air, and when it dies back at frost, the dead plant fertilizes the soil as it decays.

Another observation over the past 11 months, since the storm, has been the activation of plants that were ready to help. I mentioned earlier that winged elms are one of the first trees to establish after a disturbance. You could see the elm seedlings raining over my yard in early spring.

I have said repeatedly that God is great at healing the land, but it is usually not in a timeframe we like. I have a new appreciation for the not-so-pretty burnweed and will let them do their job for now. In the meantime, I will keep pulling elm seedlings for the foreseeable future.

