

Invasive Species Are Real and a Real Problem

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Most of us have heard the term invasive species before. If you grew up on a ranch or farm, you are probably all too familiar with things like musk thistle, field bindweed or johnsongrass. Perhaps you follow the popular press and you've read horror stories about large tropical snakes that have become established in the Everglades. Even the zebra mussels that are now in Milford Lake come under the heading of invasive species.

I prefer to use the phrase non-native invasive species or alien invasive species. We have native Kansas species, like the eastern red cedar, that can be invasive in certain situations. But native plants are usually not an issue if we maintain proper management, like periodic burning of our native pastures. Non-natives are another story though.

There's a simple biological principle that states that any species, plant, animal, or whatever, is normally held in check in a native setting by other species. For weeds, this may be an insect or a disease in it's native region that prevents over population. In the jungles where pythons are native, there are usually other animals that will keep the population in some sort of balance. Once a species is removed from it's native region, and "let loose" elsewhere, it can become a real problem.

In many ways we are fortunate to live in a climate where we have winter. Long periods of cold keeps many plants, animals and insects from becoming well established in our area. But they are also beneficial to many other species, plants especially! Most troublesome invasive species arrive somewhere with human assistance. A plant looks pretty when we see it in another state, region or country so we want to grow it at our house. We bring in plants or seeds and see if we can grow it. Sometimes it doesn't survive. Other times it survives but doesn't necessarily thrive. We call these plants well behaved! Then there's the ones that not only survive, they then start to spread like wildfire! Those are the problems.

There are many things that we as homeowners can do to reduce the risk of troublesome invasive species. When landscaping, plant native adapted varieties of plants. If you aren't sure, ask me first. Be careful when moving natural materials around. Fire ants have been brought into Kansas in potted plants. Emerald ash borer often moves when campers take firewood from one location to the next. Burn the firewood where you bought it. Don't take it with you! If you have invasive plants in your yard or on your property, control them. Bush honeysuckle, sometimes called amur or tartarian honeysuckle, is becoming a real problem in woodlands. The pretty white flowers in the spring smell wonderful, but the red berries of fall are attractive to birds and they spread the seeds everywhere. If you have one of these, cut it down and treat the stump.

One of the biggest non-native invasive threats, that many people don't even realize, are cats. The house cat is not native to the North American ecosystem. Numerous studies show that they kill somewhere between one and four billion animals in America annually, many of those are birds. It doesn't matter whether they are feral or domestic, cats are cunning killers and truly belong inside homes, not free ranging.

So next time you think a plant looks pretty, think twice before planting one at your yard. Before you buy that intriguing pet, ask yourself what you're going to do if you grow tired of it or it gets too big to maintain. Non-native invasive species are a threat, but most of them are the results of human action!