

Invasive Ornamentals Found

By: Carl C. Stafford
Senior Extension Agent

12/27/19

Ornamental grasses (Fountain Grass, Chinese Silver Grass) and woody perennials (Callery Pear, Autumn Olive) escape their home yard plantings, move across and along highways and onto nearby farm land. These plants set up colonies and spread to compete with desirable plant species on our land.

The interstate and intra state movement of invasive plants, insects and diseases harmful to other plants and animals is a regulated area by the states and the federal government. While some animal diseases have very strict rules (Brucellosis), the nursery industry rules seem to be permissive in the planting of ornamental grasses and woodies capable of and becoming, invasive. The topic for today.

Ask Robert Hitt about his problem with Fountain Grass (*Pennisetum*), a clumping perennial with seed head similar to foxtail, but different. The attractive head and its coloring (reddish and buff), its clumping nature, has homeowners and landscapers installing it, a lot. Planted frequently enough, it is easy to find in neighborhoods, rural and urban - if it would only stay there. Hitt says his problem came from across the road from a well-meaning neighbor's yard. Still doing battle on his hay and pasture ground, he finds it along roadways and in farm fields in three counties and more.

Lee County Agent, Amy Fannon, shares an image of a steep hillside pasture completely overtaken by Chinese Silver Grass (*Miscanthus*). A tall, warm season, bunching, perennial, ornamental, miscanthus is easily found in our area. Of concern would be the invasion down the Hebron Valley Road by this plant from its starting point in the village of Haywood. Over several years, it has traveled one half mile into one of the top agricultural areas of Madison. Given more time, it will be at the gate to the fertile open fields of the Hebron Valley. While the terrain is different there as compared to Lee County, the tell of success for miscanthus is its colonization of land along its southern route of progress in Madison. It does, and it will, take over land if unchecked.

Callery Pear too is found in Culpeper County and beyond. The Frontier Culture Museum, Staunton can tell us a thing or two about it – a bulldozer will be needed to open up fields there as tractor tires are no match for its thorns. The unintended offspring of Bradford Pear, this thorny, woody, perennial, invasive will take over if you do not maintain fields and show its ugly head even if you do.

Watch land let go a year or two as it is taken over by this and the Autumn Olive. Another woody perennial first planted to feed wildlife, as was Multi Flora Rose, the so-called living fence. Good intentions again but now the food source produced become the chief route of invasion – birds spread it. All of these invasive plants can be found by searching for their common name. Learn to identify them and act to keep them in check. Within a mile of my own home, all are found, escaped from home landscapes of the well-meaning and yet they are not at risk these invasives and do not carry the burden of keeping them in check.