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Be Creative When Controlling Invasive Plant Species

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Conserving wild flowers and wild places

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Be creative when controlling invasive plant species

We are often told that every cloud has a silver lining, but when it comes to invasive exotic species, it seems that the proverbial silver lining is vanishingly thin. Invasives like kudzu, Japanese honeysuckle, tree-of-heaven, and



oh-so-many others, seem ubiquitous, crowding out native plants and altering all manner of ecological interactions. Like a rock tossed in a placid pond, the negative impact of an exotic species can ripple throughout the entire ecological community. Further, populations of invasive plants can be so large and so extensive across the countryside that complete eradication is simply out of the question. The genie is truly out of the bottle. What to do?

I have pondered this question for quite a few years and I have reached a few conclusions. One is that despite the magnitude of the challenge, we who cherish native plants should

never concede victory to the exotics. But we also must realize that complete restoration of totally natural vegetation is not at all likely, either. The footprint of our own species is just too great for that to happen. But I believe we can, with perseverance and hard work, make significant improvements to pieces of the world that matter to us most, places like our own backyards, or, with proper permission, places like parks and natural areas open to the public. Unfortunately, the zealous idealism required to defeat such a tough and resilient foe can wear thin before the natural regenerative powers of the invasive plant are exhausted. It surely would help if there were additional motivations to spur us on and to continue hacking away at the resilient exotic horde.

Wouldn't it be great, for example, if one could find an actual use for the biomass of exotic species forcibly removed from the landscape? I'm reminded of the aphorism that a weed is
(See Honeysuckle, page 5)

VNPS loses valued friend

We are deeply saddened at the tragic loss of our friend and colleague, Carol Gardner. Carol was lost to us April 30, 2006. As she and her husband drove down their local road, repeated firings of an assault rifle claimed Carol and gravely injured her husband, Bill. Although Bill is recovering, he and their two sons Matt and Ben, face a very changed world.

Carol was at a very happy place in her life. She was looking forward to her youngest son's graduation from Virginia Tech in mid-May. She had successfully completed the first of a series of hikes planned to cover the Appalachian Trail with her husband and some good friends. It was spring, she was busy planting gardens and growing plants.

Carol touched many lives in a positive way. She was a strong

(See Friend, page 2)

SAVE THIS WEEKEND: September 23-24

The Shenandoah Chapter is hosting the annual VNPS meeting this fall. The weekend event offers full-day and half-day field trips on Saturday, an annual meeting with Doug Coleman as the dinner speaker Saturday evening, and half-day field trips on Sunday. Watch for more information in the coming months and on the VNPS website.

• Honeysuckle chicken salad?

(Continued from page 1)

nothing but a plant whose virtues (uses) are yet to be appreciated. If we had a reason to crop the exotics we might stick with the task, return to it frequently, and ultimately have a significant impact. In this article, the first of a short series, I will share a few ideas about how I use invasive species in ways that work against the continued existence of these pests on my property. Most of the strategies that I will share involve my flock of chickens and my vegetable garden. So, clearly, not every reader will be prepared or inclined to follow suit. But some may. And, perhaps, the strategies presented here will inspire other clever ideas to put these pests to good use as they are removed from the environment.

Japanese honeysuckle as chicken salad

By all accounts, Japanese honeysuckle is one of the worst invasive exotics in eastern North America. No need here to expound on its domination of the forest understory, its propensity to twine upon and strangle the trunks of sapling trees, and its smothering impact on leafy canopies of trees and shrubs alike. Simply put, it is a genuine pest. And much to my dismay, upon purchasing a few acres in rural Powhatan County a few years ago, I found myself proprietor of a major infestation of the stuff.

It just so happened that shortly after moving to Powhatan, we decided to raise a few chickens. As the little chicks grew, it became clear that, while the commercial feed preparations are sold as "complete" diets, the birds truly relished snacking on insects and fresh vegetation. Soon, I fell into the habit of tossing all manner of greenery into the chicken yards, weeds from my vegetables and flower borders, crabgrass, chickweed, bittercress pulled from my lawn, and extra vegetables, etc.

The chickens are like little garbage disposals. I've been told that chickens know enough to leave poisonous plants alone, but just to be safe, I toss obvious toxic things (like jimson weed) directly in the compost pile. Eventually winter approached and green leafy garden

scraps became scarce, and I began to look around for a winter source of greens for the chickens. I did not have to look far. As mentioned above, my yard is infested with Japanese honeysuckle and, since this species is at least semi-evergreen in my area, there was plenty of it right at hand. I had discovered a new motivation to hack away at this nasty invasive exotic.

I generally harvest Japanese honeysuckle from around Thanksgiving to sometime in late March. I use a pair of hand pruners (clippers) and snip the vines into manageable pieces from six to 24 or so inches long. Something between one-half to one full hour's effort yields a heaping wheelbarrow of fresh salad for the birds. I grab everything, leaves, twigs, viney stems up to a half inch in diameter and, most important of all, the runner-like stems that grow at the soil-to-leaf-litter interface. I also try to pull up as many roots as I can, too. I don't bother sorting out extraneous dead leaves and pine needles.

Everything gets clipped and tossed into the chicken yards. The chickens consume the leaves, frequently stripping the stems and twigs bare in just a few hours. I've also seen them eat tender root tips, shoot tips, and sprouting lateral buds, all tender meristem tissues. Inedible material simply becomes part of the bedding.

I use the honeysuckle mostly as a winter season supplement. Birds seem disinterested in honeysuckle during the growing season when they are also offered a wide variety of other species. But in the dead of winter, when there are few other sources of greenery, they attack the honeysuckle with gusto.

Pulling honeysuckle out of the canopy and ripping up its roots and runner stems in summer is dirty, hot, sweaty work; it is much more pleasant in winter when any excuse to get outside and breathe some fresh air is welcome. Finally, ticks and chiggers are seldom encountered pulling honeysuckle in winter time. I try to be as fastidious as possible, removing every last scrap of honeysuckle biomass from an area before moving on to the next patch. Nevertheless, I always miss quite a bit on my first assault. But that's not a big problem. The first year's effort in pulling honeysuckle

results in a marked impact on the infestation. Next year's efforts in that same spot go quickly and an ever greater fraction of the original biomass is removed in subsequent years. I'm not fixing the problem in any global sense, but I do believe that I am improving my own little corner of the world.

I'm convinced that wintertime honeysuckle salad is good for my birds. I can find no references to toxic compounds in this species, and my birds eat honeysuckle every few days throughout every winter to no obvious ill-effect. I suspect that the quality of our eggs is a valid measure of our bird's health while consuming Japanese honeysuckle. Our bird's plump and bright orange egg yolks put the flaccid yellow yolks of store-bought eggs to shame.

Of course, there is much indigestible matter in a honeysuckle leaf and this material passes through the bird, eventually mixing with the bedding. Every week or so, I clean up the chicken yards and the spent bedding, the bird's droppings, and miscellaneous twigs and vine segments of honeysuckle are tossed on the compost pile. Eventually, nutrients and organic matter that once resided in honeysuckle biomass becomes fertilizer for my vegetable and flower gardens.

To summarize, using Japanese honeysuckle as chicken salad has numerous benefits: Local biomass of a nasty exotic species is diminished. Pulling and clipping is good wintertime exercise in the fresh air. Chickens get a beneficial dietary supplement along with increments of extra bedding (twigs and vines). The nutritional value of the chicken eggs is enhanced. Composting of indigestible honeysuckle tissues contributes to the compost pile and, eventually, the quality and quantity of my vegetables. With all those positive outcomes, how can I not make time to pull Japanese honeysuckle in winter? Maybe there always is a silver lining, it's just a matter of looking at the cloud, i.e., looking at the problem, the right way.

Future installments will focus on exotic green mulch, frozen beetle treats, and garden poles.
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