

Green Invaders

They may look harmless, even quite lovely, with curling tendrils, broad leaves, or many blossoms. However, some plant species that are not native to particular environments can become invasive (act like an invader) by growing rapidly and stifling the growth of pre-existing plants.

Are All Nonnative Plants Invasive?

Many of the plants that are familiar to us did not originally grow in North America. They were brought here by settlers from other continents. Familiar grains such as wheat and oats are now at home and are basic elements of American agriculture. The characteristics of a nonnative plant (one that has been introduced to locations outside its natural range) that cause it to be considered invasive are its aggressive growth and reproductive habits.

How Do Invasive Species Cause Harm?

Nonnative plants are often very hearty, and as they spread, they reduce the diversity of plant life that existed in the location where they have taken root. They compete with native plants and may eventually displace them. In addition to affecting local plant life, invasive species can harm natural ecosystems in many ways. Among these are by:

- Changing the characteristics of the soil
- Repelling or even killing native insects
- Harboring plant diseases

How Did Invasive Plants Become a Problem?

Some invasive plants like Purple Loosestrife, for example, were first introduced to a habitat in which they were not native by unsuspecting gardeners. This plant quickly spread as its seeds washed into waterways and were deposited in wetlands and woodlands. Like so many invasive species, this plant has the ability to sprout from tiny fragments of its roots as well, so efforts to remove it often do not work.

Another famous invader is Kudzu, a vine native to Japan that was first introduced in the United States in the late 1800s and quickly caught on as a means of erosion control. However, these vines grow so well that they can destroy entire forests by blocking the sunlight needed by native trees.

Sometimes, invasive plants make their way into environments to which they are not native purely by accident. Bird and animal droppings may allow for the spread of seeds. Seeds can also be transported in the goods shipped from one region to another or on the muddy tires of vehicles used to transport these goods.

What Can We Do About Invasive Plants?

Individuals help reduce the problems created by invasive plants by finding out which plants are invasive in the area where they live. They learn to identify those plants and remove them from their own property when possible. Several state environmental organizations have worked together in the creation of a poster of “Kentucky’s Least Wanted Plants.” Others like the Kentucky Exotic Pest Plant Council work to raise public awareness about the problem of invasive plants and to encourage volunteers to become “weed warriors” in the fight against those green invaders.

Writing situation:

Your science teacher has asked each student in class to help make others aware of nonnative plant species that were introduced outside of their natural range and the issues they can cause. You read the passage “Green Invaders,” and you decide to use the news media to create awareness creating an argument against allowing this invasion to continue.

Writing directions:

Write an article to be published on the local news station’s blog to create awareness of the issue of nonnative plants. In your blog, create your argument for the need to control the spread of invasive nonnative plants with a community action plan. Use information from the passage to support your plan.