The Invasive

Exotic Bush Honeysuckles:

Loniceranana (Amur honeysuckle),
L. morrowii (Morrow’s honeysuckle),
L. tatarica (Tartarian honeysuckle),
L. x bella (Showy pink honeysuckle)

Many homeowners are surprised to find out that the bush honeysuckle growing in their yards are exotic, invasive plants. The confusion is probably due to the fact that North America is home to quite a few native honeysuckles, most of which are actually vines with the exception of northern bush-honeysuckle (Diervilla lonicera), a native shrub that looks quite similar to true bush honeysuckles. The many species of exotic bush honeysuckles invading eastern North America are all native to Eurasia and were planted in America as ornaments starting in the mid-1800s. Their fragrant, tubular white-to-pink flowers and equally alluring red-orange berries are as attractive to wildlife as they are to people, and therein lays the threat to various ecosystems throughout Ohio. The birds that eat the fruits and help spread the honeysuckle seeds actually gain little from the berries, which don’t contain the fats that fruits from native plants provide. Bush honeysuckles also compete with native flowers for pollinators. Once established, bush honeysuckles create a dense shrub layer that shades out other plants and depletes soil moisture and nutrients. Bush honeysuckles are likely to be found in disturbed forests, forest edges, abandoned fields, roadsides and even marsh edges.

The Native Alternatives

Lindera benzoin (spicebush)

A common component to the understory of floodplains and bottomlands throughout northeast Ohio, spicebush is a fantastic native alternative to plant in the home landscape for wildlife, pollinators and for multi-season interest. Small, fragrant flowers clustered tight to the stem bloom in early spring. Scarlet, single-seeded fruits ripen by late summer and provide an excellent source of food for migratory birds. Spicebush is also the larval host plant for the spicebush swallowtail butterflies, making it a great addition to a butterfly garden. In addition to turning a brilliant gold color in the fall, the ovate leaves give off a spicy, citrusy scent when crushed; a great sensory experience that can help when introducing children to the garden. Spicebush can grow in a wide range of soil, moisture and light conditions, but prefers moist, humus-rich soil. Though it does well in deep shade, it achieves the best fall color in areas that get a lot of sun. Since spicebush is a dioecious plant, meaning male and female flowers grow on separate plants, plant spicebush in groups to increase the likelihood of pollination, which will ensure a fruitful plant. Check out the Arlene and Arthur S. Holden Jr. Butterfly Garden to see spicebush planted in a garden setting and visit the Molly Offutt Memorial Boardwalk to see it in its natural environment.

Sambucus canadensis (elderberry)

Though ubiquitous and often overlooked throughout Ohio’s native forests, elderberry is a great shrub for the home landscape with excellent benefits for wildlife. Elderberry grows 5-12 feet tall and has pinnately compound leaves, which look similar to the foliage of an ash tree. Tiny white flowers arranged on flat, 4-6 inch umbels bloom in early summer and attract a plethora of pollinators. By early fall, small, deep purple berries hang in bunches off of the shrub. Generous homeowners leave the berries for birds and squirrels, while the more culinary-inclined use the berries to make jellies, pies and wine. The antioxidant-rich berries have been used for centuries as a food and medicine. Caution should be used when selecting a site to plant elderberry, as the leaves and other vegetative parts of the plant contain trace amounts of cyanide, which can be a potential health risk for livestock. Elderberry prefers moist, well-drained soils and enjoys full sunlight and partial shade. Look for elderberry in the floodplain section of the Myrtle S. Holden Wildflower Garden.