Thousands of plants have been introduced to the United States from other parts of the world. Some have come here accidentally in seed stock, while others were brought here intentionally for horticultural use. A small number of these introduced plants have gotten a little too comfortable in their new environment. Because they have no native predators and produce a lot of fruit and seed that are efficiently dispersed, they are invading natural areas. The aggressiveness of these invasive plants affects natural areas and wildlife by decreasing biodiversity, competing with native and rare plants and eliminating wildlife habitat and food sources.

Plant This, Not That features a list of native alternatives to a commonly used landscape plant that has become invasive. The alternatives were chosen because their characteristics—form, flowers, fruit or fall color—are similar to that of the invasive and fulfill the same landscaping need. Plants that are native to Ohio are recommended when possible as native species are generally well-adapted to local climates and provide additional resources for wildlife. However, there are many non-native plants on the market that are also non-invasive and possess great ornamental value.

The Invasive

Phalaris arundinacea (Reed Canary Grass)

“The observation with reed canary grass is that it is wise not to plant it if one wishes ever to get rid of it.”

While that might seem like advice from a modern conservationist, it is actually a quote from a text written in 1940 by Indiana botanist C. C. Dray. Dray’s observation has proven true as Phalaris arundinacea has become a subtle and pernicious invader of Ohio’s wetlands and disturbed uplands.

While many invasive plants are introduced by accident, the introduction of P. arundinacea was far from unintended. P. arundinacea was introduced to Northeast Ohio in two different ways. The first started as early as 1850 when varieties were brought over from Europe for use as forage. In 1929, the USDA recommended planting P. arundinacea and praised its tolerance for wetland soils and cold winters, rapid spread and early maturity.

Chasmanthium latifolium ‘River Mist’

Variegated Northern Sea Oats

This variegated variety of Chasmanthium latifolium, commonly called Northern or Inland Sea Oats, is a relative newcomer to gardens and nurseries. ‘River Mist’ tolerates a variety of soil types and light conditions, and doesn’t mind extended periods of saturated soils. In fact, it thrives in moist soils with dappled shade. Its growth habit is reminiscent of bamboos and grows to about 2-3 feet in height. ‘River Mist’ has added benefit of adding winter interest as it retains its oat-like seed heads into winter, thus providing food for wildlife.

Panicum virgatum ‘Ruby Ribbons’ Red Switch Grass

If striking color and contrast is what your garden is missing Panicum virgatum ‘Ruby Ribbons’ may fill the void. While its leaves are not variegated, they provide superb color with their wine-red tipped leaves and flower panicles, the latter of which persist into winter. With foliage that can grow to about four feet in height, this well-manicured grass is tolerant of wet and dry soils and grows best in full sun to part shade. Examples of ‘Ruby Ribbons’ can be found in Holden’s Display Garden.