The Invasive

Euonymus alatus (burning bush)

Known for its brilliant red fall color, Euonymus alatus (burning bush) was introduced from Asia in 1860 as an ornamental shrub. Many cultivars are available, and despite its invasive tendencies, burning bush continues to be widely planted. It easily adapts to different soil types, has no significant pests or diseases, and is extremely shade-tolerant. Birds feed on the fleshy fruits and disperse the seeds. Burning bush naturalizes in woodlands, where it forms dense stands that outcompete native plants in the understory.

Euonymus alatus (with red foliage) in native forest
Leslie J. Mehrhoff, University of Connecticut, Bugwood.org

Hundreds 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 lots 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—that are similar to that of the invasive and fulfill the same landscaping need. On a broader scale, native plants help create a healthier ecosystem, attract a greater diversity of wildlife and may minimize the need for fertilizers and pesticides.

The Native Alternatives

Vaccinium corymbosum (highbush blueberry) is an upright, rounded deciduous shrub that grows in moist habitats, such as swamps and bogs, in the eastern United States and Canada. Hardy to Zone 3, it can reach 6-12 feet tall and wide. This species is the parent of many cultivars that are grown for commercial blueberry production. Dainty white or pink bell-shaped flowers appear in late spring, followed by edible blue fruit in summer that is enjoyed by both wildlife and humans. Glossy dark green leaves turn brilliant red to purple in fall. The best fruit set and fall color occurs under full sun, but the plant can tolerate partial shade. As a member of the Ericaceae (heath family), which includes rhododendrons, heaths, and mountain laurels, highbush blueberry performs best in acidic soils. This shrub has no serious pest or disease problems and is best used for mass plantings and informal borders. Look for highbush blueberry in the Myrtle S. Holden Wildflower Garden along the stream and in the bog below the prairie garden. Vaccinium ‘Ornablue’ can be found in the Arthur S. Holden Sr. Hedge Collection.

Vaccinium corymbosum Kurt Stüber

Aronia melanocarpa (black chokeberry) grows in moist woods in the northeastern United States and the Great Lakes region, but can also grow further south in higher elevations of the Appalachian Mountains. Hardy to Zone 3, this deciduous shrub has an upright, mounded form and can reach 4-6 feet in height and width. Clusters of white flowers appear in the spring as glossy green foliage unfolds. Brilliant red to burgundy foliage and small black fruits develop in early fall. The fruit is edible, but extremely tart and bitter when raw, giving the shrub its name of chokeberry. Birds will rely on the fruits as food if the availability of other sources is limited. Black chokeberry prefers full sun to partial shade and can adapt to wet or dry conditions, but prefers neutral to acidic soil. Use this shrub for mass plantings, informal borders, and pond plantings. Look for black chokeberry in the woodland section of the Myrtle S. Holden Wildflower Garden, west of the stream.

Aronia melanocarpa Copyright David G. Smith

Editor’s note: This is the first in a series on recommended landscape alternatives to invasive plants.