



Is this the  
alternative?

# IT'S NOT JUST A GROWER ISSUE

By Chris Howe, Hortech Inc.

Let me state for the record that I am an advocate of the natural world. I hunt, fish, hike, swim, and at every chance I get, surround myself with the beauty that Michigan's natural world has to offer. I appreciate native plants and their ecology, and I treasure their uniqueness. And, for the record, I think that we should have a management plan and laws that address invasive species, both plant and animal.

But, I understand that there is a difference between invasive plants and animals and those that aren't invasive. I know that because a zebra mussel can multiply exponentially, alter entire ecosystems, and move from lake to lake by natural means (by currents or on the feet of ducks and herons for example), that it is an invasive species. I also know garlic mustard moves long distances by natural means (i.e., extremely prolific and viable seed that is moved about by water, as well as by the feet and alimentary tracts of rodents), is difficult to control, alters ecosystems, and for these reasons is an invasive (plant) species.

I also know that just because a plant spreads by runners, like periwinkle (*Vinca minor*), it doesn't mean that it is an invasive species. Nor, because a plant such as *Pennisetum setaceum* (annual fountain grass) is invasive in California, is it invasive in Michigan, where our climate is entirely different. And, I know that not every non-native plant that I see in a natural area is invasive. After all, it may have been planted there, or it may just be an isolated plant that doesn't have any substantial bearing on the ecosystem.

Today, there is a ton of information and misinformation in circulation about invasive plants. There is even a law that contains obvious flaws. Although legislative subjects are easy to dismiss because they appear either incomprehensible or well-meaning, their unintended consequences often leave us wishing that we had paid more attention sooner. The old adage applies, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Michigan Public Acts 74–80 state that the sale of *Iris pseudacorus*, yellow flag iris, and *Fallopia japonica*, Japanese

fleece flower, including any hybrids or cultivars of these species is prohibited. These plants, by the way, have not to my knowledge been scientifically determined to be invasive species.

How *Fallopia japonica* and *Iris pseudacorus* were included in this legislation is anybody's guess. And, it's not difficult to imagine why this type of legislation gets passed. Consider our typical legislator, how many of them are experienced in horticulture or educated in the complexities of the botanical world? How would they know the difference between a species and a cultivar or hybrid? And, do they have the time to seek out experienced and educated sources to learn how plants grow, spread, disperse, thrive or struggle under varying geographic and environmental conditions?

*While the invasive plant acts went into effect last July, they have not been enforced. The laws do not even clearly define responsibility for their enforcement. Presumably, the Department of Agriculture will be given this authority and currently our Michigan*



Time proven cultivars perform in conditions of extreme heat, drought, cold, wind, and salinity. *Fallopia japonica* 'Compacta' (left) and 'Variegata'

*Nursery and Landscape Association representatives are pursuing their amendment to allow the Michigan Department of Agriculture to approve exceptions for commercially valuable cultivars (of prohibited and restricted plant species) that do not display invasive qualities. It's a foot race to get this legislation passed by the spring of 2006.*

Given the fervor and, often times, misinformation surrounding invasive plants, I am writing to express my concerns, as a horticulturist, about some of the misrepresentation of the invasive plant issues I have come across. And, I'm writing to let you know that this isn't just a grower issue, and here is why:

### ***A Landscape Designer's Perspective***

Landscape designers are continually challenged to match plants with harsh environments. Roadside embankments, boulevards, and parking lot islands are a few harsh areas that come to mind. These areas are difficult to vegetate because of their constant exposure to wind, drought, heat, cold, light, and road salt. I'm not aware of any plant that performs as well under these brutal conditions as *Fallopia japonica* 'Compacta'. Its durability and ability to bind the soil make it second to none.

Certainly, I have observed colonies of the parent species *Fallopia japonica* in

local parks and disturbed roadside areas. I also know that it has been distributed primarily by man's movement of contaminated soil, as this species is generally infertile in the U.S. Because of this (its lack of gap-crossing dispersal by natural means), its invasive status is sometimes debated (to date it has not yet been evaluated by the Michigan Invasive Plant Council's protocol). Regardless, the cultivars 'Compacta' and 'Variegata', despite decades of cultivation, have not demonstrated invasive characteristics.

The invasive plant issue now becomes important to the landscape designer when tried and proven plants like *Fallopia japonica* 'Compacta' and 'Variegata' are lumped together with the species and are prohibited from use, even though they have no history of invasiveness. Now the designer is faced with finding another plant to replace *Fallopia japonica* 'Compacta' or 'Variegata' and that is a tall order. In such extreme environments as where *Fallopia japonica* 'Compacta' or 'Variegata' thrive, many alternative plants will die out over time, thus leading to erosion. Worse yet, many people will simply resort to stone, cement, or asphalt instead of green space. This would have the detrimental effect of increased heat, run off, pollution to our waterways, and unsightly appearance.

### ***A Landscaper's Perspective***

On the surface, one might think prohibited plants could be a boom to landscapers. It could be an opportunity to remove plants from existing landscapes and install new ones— although there is no requirement for removal of plants under the current law and no one would actually pay for this. I think it's more likely that the customer is going to demand that the so-called "invasive plant", previously recommended and installed, be removed and replaced at the landscaper's cost. Can your business afford to remove and replant landscapes without charging your customer?

This type of scenario has already played out with such common plants as *Euonymus alatus* 'Compactus' (Compact Burning Bush), *Acer plantanoides* (Norway Maple), and *Hemerocallis fulva* (Orange Daylily), when such plants have shown up on hastily composed invasive plant lists.

In such instances, if you're unaware of current invasive plant issues, you're caught red-faced, uninformed and unable to address your customer's claims, and unable to educate them about the facts. In such cases, you will need to tell them that these plants have not been proven to be invasive and that the list they read was not based on a scientific evaluation. As professionals, it is imperative that we stay abreast of

these issues. If we don't, then we are in no position to cope with misinformation that may lead to misperceptions about our business practices.

### ***A Garden Center Manager's Perspective***

Garden center managers and staff must also become educated on invasive plants, because they are on the front line of educating the end consumer. The danger to garden centers is plants on shelves that suddenly stop selling because a newspaper or magazine editor allowed an article containing an 'Invasive Plant List' to be published without researching and validating the origin of such a list. How should a garden center react if its inventory of a particular plant stops selling because its customers read something that affected their buying decisions? In today's competitive business environment, no garden center manager can afford to be

complacent with issues that affect their bottom line.

Garden center managers need to acknowledge that most home owners are generally not well educated in the diverse world of horticulture or biology. This makes them especially susceptible to receive, believe, spread, and be influenced by unproven invasive plant information. The general public is quick to latch on to anything portrayed as an environmental threat and, if we don't do our part as green industry professionals to become educated and involved in invasive issues, then who will the public turn to for information?

### ***Action Plan***

What this all means to each of us is that we need to be educated and take action. There are several things we can and should do.

- Educate our family, friends, customers and our staff about invasive issues.

- Evaluate new plants for invasiveness before introducing them for sale.
- Become a member of the Michigan Invasive Plant Council so you are aware of the latest issues and your voice can be heard. It only costs \$25.00.
- Contact our government and association representatives to voice our concerns.
- Respond to newspapers, magazines, and television stations when they produce invasive lists that aren't based on facts.
- Eradicate truly invasive plants from our property.

In a nut shell, we should be proactive with invasive plants. We may actually introduce an element of common sense and reason to this complex and often misrepresented subject. 



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