



# Noxious Weeds – the Arrival of Aliens!

What are 'noxious weeds' and why should you care about them?

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**M**ost gardeners would say that any weed in their garden is a noxious weed. However, the term “noxious weed” has a specific legal meaning: a non-native plant designated by federal, state, or county law as aggressive and injurious. The terms “noxious weed” and “invasive” are sometimes used interchangeably, which is not always accurate. All noxious weeds are invasive, but not all invasive plants are noxious weeds.

Invasiveness is subjective. Conservationists consider plants invasive when they escape gardens and spread aggressively in natural areas, whereas gardeners call a plant invasive if it does not stay put in their gardens. An invasive plant becomes a noxious weed when a state determines that it could potentially harm agriculture, human health, and the environment. Although some landscape plants “escape,” for example winter

creeper (*Euonymus fortunei*), about half of all invasive noxious weeds are accidentally introduced through human travel and commerce. Noxious weeds are most commonly found in small-acreage landscapes, pastures, or places where the soil has recently been disturbed, like new construction, than in the average home landscape.

## WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Why should I care about noxious weeds? I want my land to be natural! Letting noxious weeds take over your property does not leave your land “natural.” Noxious weeds will eventually replace much of the native vegetation if the land is not properly managed. Aggressive weeds upset the ecological balance, crowd out native plants, ruin recreational areas, clog waterways, and potentially poison humans and livestock.

The exact definition of a “noxious weed” is subject to individual state interpretation, since each state has its own “Noxious Weed List.” Very few wildflower species are listed. A plant listed as “noxious” in one state may not be prohibited in another. Consult your state list for more information. All noxious weed lists are full of common roadside and pasture weeds. It is the legal responsibility of every landowner to control all noxious weeds growing on his or her property to prevent them from going to seed.

## INVASION OF ALIEN SPECIES

Although the worst “actors” have been designated as noxious weeds, there are many invasive weed species that have the potential to cause severe damage to the environment. Invasive plants should really be thought of as exotic specimens “gone wild.” Characteristics of invasive

◀ Japanese honeysuckle is a woody semi-evergreen vine that climbs and drapes over native vegetation, forming dense patches.

➤ Purple loosestrife thrives in wet areas and spreads rapidly along highway and railroad drainage ditches crowding out native flora.

and noxious weeds include: a) rapid growth, b) high production of seeds or fruit that are easily spread by wind, water, or animals, c) deep or fibrous roots, and d) tolerance to many soil types.

Purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) is perhaps the most beautiful, yet hated noxious pest species. This tall purple-flowered plant with brilliant spikes of color is found especially in wetland areas. It spreads very rapidly by heavy seeding and underground roots (rhizomes) along river banks, and in roadside ravines and railroad ditches. It will replace native plants with a nearly pure stand of loosestrife.

As a dense spreading shrub, multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*) was originally planted as a “living fence” to control livestock, stabilize soil, and create barriers for roadways. It is now a menace in many of these areas. With its arching canes and stiff, curved thorns, this shrub grows up to 15 feet tall. Numerous white flowers produce clusters of small red fruits, which are eaten by birds and mammals that disperse the seeds.

Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) is a tall herbaceous perennial with prickly leaves and lavender flowerheads. It is a noxious weed in most Midwestern states. Canada thistle produces an abundance of bristly-plumed seeds that are easily dispersed by wind. Seeds remain viable in the soil for up to 20 years. Mechanical eradication is difficult since it can readily regenerate from root fragments less than an inch in length.

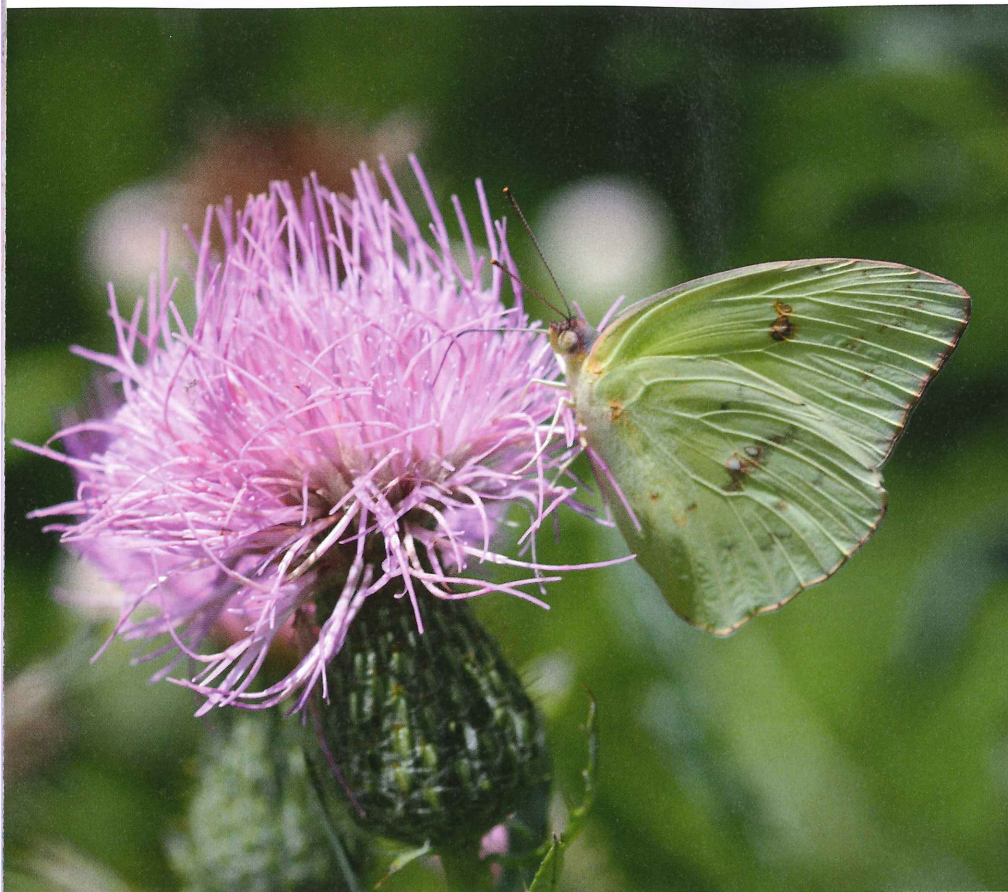
Many of the listed plants have pretty flowers. The flowers of Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) are attractive and very fragrant, but the vine is extremely invasive.

#### WHAT CAN I DO?

Even though they may be pretty, do not plant invasive plants. Some plants, such as purple loosestrife, are still sold in nurseries or online, so beware! When participating in a plant or seed exchange, or trading perennials with fellow gardeners, be sure you know what you are planting.

Remove invasive weeds. The key to noxious weed control is early detection and management, before that weed has spread. Birds and other animals





may eat the seeds and fruits of these plants and spread them to nearby uninfested areas. Take care not to spread the seeds when disposing of noxious weeds. To eliminate these tough perennial weeds, you may need to use a combination of methods including mowing, cutting, digging, and herbicide treatment.

With the current trend of using native plants in the landscape, it is important to keep these “alien” species from landing and crowding out the indigenous plants. So, brush up on your weed identification, look around, and prevent their establishment in your landscape.

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◀ **Although Canada thistle may attract butterflies when in bloom, it is a noxious weed in many states and must be controlled.**

▼ **Callery pear has escaped from cultivation. It spreads rapidly into open areas, such as vacant lots, right-of-ways, and road sides, often developing into dense thickets.**

