

Connecticut Needs to Update its Invasive Species Policies: Here's How You Can Help

By Holly Kocet and Barbara Thompson

One need not look very far to witness the aggressive spread of invasive plants into our woodlands and natural areas. They are everywhere, along roadsides and trails, bordering lawns and schoolyards, creeping into meadows. Any land disturbance is an opportunity for invasives to gain a foothold.

Land trusts and town open spaces are hugely important for conserving our wild places, not only because they preserve native flora that provides for and protects wildlife, but also because they are essential to our well-being. Invasive plants have invaded these natural areas, however, displacing native flora and putting wildlife and public health at risk. Managing these preserves has become increasingly difficult, labor intensive and costly.



Japanese barberry photo courtesy of CT Invasive Plant Working Group (CIPWG).

Several of the most damaging invasive plants, while on state Invasive Plant Lists, are **not yet prohibited** and are still sold in nurseries. For example, in Connecticut it is still possible to purchase Japanese Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*), a shrub with a known connection to tick-related disease: “Japanese barberry infestations are favorable habitat for ticks, as they provide a buffered microclimate that limits desiccation-induced tick mortality. Control of Japanese barberry reduced the number of ticks infected with *B. burgdorferi* (Lyme disease) by nearly 60% by reverting microclimatic conditions to those more typical of native northeastern forests”. (Environmental Entomology, December 2010, *Managing Japanese Barberry... Abundances in CT*, Scott C. Williams, J. S. Ward.)

Tick-borne disease transmission is not limited to Lyme disease. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists the multiple pathogens carried by ticks that cause disease in humans: [Diseases Transmitted by Ticks | Ticks | CDC](#).

Barberry is a particularly problematic invasive because the plants out-compete native species which are more valuable to wildlife. By crowding out seedlings on the forest floor, barberry can also prevent forests from re-growing normally.

These concerns have led to the banning of barberry sales in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, Pennsylvania, New York, and Minnesota.

The time has come for the Pollinator Pathway, land trusts, town commissions, watershed associations, foresters, and other like-minded groups and individuals to come together with one voice. CT legislators and the Environment Committee of the CT General Assembly need to hear our concerns. We need changes to existing law that recognize invasives as an environmental crisis. We need the state to review and update the list of invasive plants that should be prohibited from sale, and they should invite stakeholder participation. Our Connecticut communities need help in dealing with existing infestations. The CT Invasive Plant Working Group (CIPWG) has done an admirable job on an ad hoc basis in public education and outreach, but there is still an urgent need for more action at the state level.

Connecticut residents, if you are concerned about the proliferation of invasive plants, please review the attached letter and email or call your state legislators. It is so important for them to hear from all of us. You can find their contact information [HERE](#).

For additional information, please contact Holly Kocet, Co-chair Pollinator Pathway Invasive Plants Committee, info@pollinator-pathway.org.

Sample Letter to CT Representatives

To: Representative _____
Senator _____

From: _____

Subject: Invasive Plants Crisis and State Inaction

I am contacting you because of my concern about the proliferation of invasive plants in Connecticut and the lack of action on the part of the State. Not only do invasive plants cost towns, state agencies, land trusts, farmers, homeowners, and others large sums of money and thousands of hours of labor for removal and restoration; invasive plants cause serious harm to woodlands, farms, wetlands, and other natural areas. They also contribute to a decline in habitat that leads to a decline of the wildlife populations needed for a healthy environment.

Some background:

2002 – The CT Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ)’s report titled *Great Infestations* stated, “**The second biggest threat to Connecticut’s natural habitats is invasion by alien plants and animals** (behind loss of habitat to sprawling land development). With few natural enemies, these species grow, spread, and multiply so fast they can transform healthy ecosystems into weed-clogged woodlands and waterways in just a few years. Worse, many of our native plants and animals are deprived of light, nutrients and ultimately their continued existence. Collectively, invasive species are a silent but serious environmental problem for which Connecticut is not prepared.”

2022 – CEQ’s 20-year update to 2002’s *Great Infestations* states “It has been 20 years since the Council on Environment Quality released its report on invasive species. In the intervening years, those that were identified in that report have prospered and many new invasive species, both animal and plant, have taken up residence in our state.”

State funding for the CT Invasive Plants Council has been inadequate in recent years. From their 2022 Annual Report:

“Since removal of invasive species from natural areas is extremely costly, the state is best served by programs that prevent future invasions through education, training, and the targeting of resources toward early detection and eradication campaigns. Prevention and early detection coupled with public education and training represent the most efficient, timely, and effective responses to emerging invasions and **merit increased emphasis and legislative financial support, not passive neglect.**” <https://cipwg.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/244/2022/02/2021-IPC-annual-report-final.pdf>

Clearly, efforts to address invasive species over the past 20 years have failed. We are losing irreplaceable, vital habitats to invasive plants and there is not enough effort by the State to stop them.

There are realistic recommendations to address invasive plants, including:

- Increase funding for the Connecticut Invasive Plants Council.
- Simplify and strengthen the criteria in CT invasive plant law (Conn. Gen. Stat. Sec 22a-381a–e) required for listing a plant as invasive.
- Change the status of Japanese barberry and other problem invasive plants like porcelain berry and burning bush to “Prohibited from Sale” status and implement a transparent review of the status of all plants on the CT Invasive Plant list: https://cipwg.uconn.edu/invasive_plant_list/

- Share research and expertise with neighboring states. For example, the New York State Partnerships for Regional Invasive Species Management organization is a robust regional invasive species management model: <https://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/47433.html> . Plants don't adhere to state borders and we can all benefit from sharing information.
- Mandate labeling for 'potentially invasive' plants if they are going to continue to be sold, as happens in New York with "regulated" plants. See the New York State Prohibited and Regulated Invasive Plant list: https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/isprohibitedplants2.pdf
- Require increased outreach and education by DEEP to CT residents about invasive plants, how they harm the environment, and how to remove them.

Thank you,