



By *Barbara Elmore, HCMG*

Putting a Bull's-Eye on Invasives

A person might crack a smile at the words "Asian sprangletop," and that's OK. Just don't plant it in the back yard. Also to be avoided: tree of heaven. Heavenly it is not, at least in Texas.

These are two of the perhaps lesser-known rooted wonders that bear a scarlet letter – an "I" for invasive. Probably hordes of gardeners have succumbed to better-known charms of *Ligustrum japonicum*, for example, or are pleased with the hardiness of *Lantana camara*. But the Japanese privet and the pretty, multihued lantana both earn a spot on someone's X list.

According to the Texas Invasives web site, aggressive plants that hail from somewhere else can do some or all of these things:

- Choke out beneficial native plants while threatening native animals and ecosystems
- Multiply rapidly
- Clog waterways
- Cost billions of dollars annually in removal, prevention and damage repair

The web site is part of a partnership between governmental and private organizations, including the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. Partners announced the formation of a Texas Invasive Plant and Pest Council last June. The partnership makes sense as both government agencies and individuals intentionally planted many of the invasives. In some cases, it seemed like a good idea at the time. The Chinese tallow was meant to help the soap industry. Some of the most aggressive Texas grasses appeared courtesy of ranchers, who wanted fast-growing cattle forage.

Because different agencies are in charge of reporting and control, no one can say exactly how many invaders are in Texas. The document "Invasive Species Texas," published by the Union of Concerned Scientists, reports a minimum of 67 terrestrial plants and 12 aquatic plants on its blacklist. It includes such trees as the Chinese tallow, which occupies 30,000 acres in Galveston County, and hydrilla, which chokes between 75,000 and 100,000 acres of waterways in Texas.

The document calls three plants "Worst of the Worst" because of the damage they do: saltcedar, which alters soil salinity, reduces flow of water bodies, and displaces other valuable plants; hydrilla, which depletes oxygen in the water; and the giant salvinia, a choking aquatic fern that doubles as a mosquito breeding ground. Runners up for the "worst" title are waterhyacinth and the giant reed.

Preventing the spread of invasives is not yet widely accepted. As experts note, calling a plant "invasive" can result in controversy. But people who want to apply as volunteer spotters can go to the Texas Invasives organizations web site and click on "Citizen Scientists" link on the left side for further instruction.

Resources for further information:

Texas Invasives — Invasives, common names; invasives database; publications
Texas Department of Agriculture — noxious plant list
Texas Parks & Wildlife — prohibited exotic species
City of Austin Parks — Download a pdf list of Central Texas Invasive Plants