

Privet (*Ligustrum sinense*) and its Dirty Not-So-Little Secret

Have you ever planted something that you thought was perfect only to regret it later? In this space where we usually feature recommended plants, we are highlighting a popular shrub that is problematic and should be avoided.

Chinese privet (*Ligustrum sinense*) and its *Ligustrum* cousins are popular landscape shrubs that have a significant flaw – they're an ecological nightmare. Privets certainly seem to check off a lot of desirable boxes for many homeowners: low maintenance, mostly evergreen, shade tolerant, privacy hedge, pretty flowers and beautiful berries. BUT ... privets are, plain and simple, botanical thugs that have escaped from our backyards into our natural areas. Once established, privet alters the forest ecosystem by creating excessive shade, choking out native plants, and reducing biodiversity.



Privet taking over. Photo: DCMGA

Removing privet from woodlands and riparian areas for restoration projects will be a never-ending battle. In some cases, these natural areas are far from the suburban landscapes that were the original privet source. Berry-eating birds are an efficient dispersal method, plus privet spreads by suckering roots, quickly creating impenetrable thickets.

"I think privet is the worst invasive by far," says Courtney Blevins, Regional Forester with the Texas Forest Service (TFS). He fears old growth trees in North Central Texas are not adequately being replaced because dense stands of privet are preventing tree seedlings from growing. Our beautiful oak forests could become a privet wasteland. Not surprisingly, privet has made the Cross Timbers list of the Dirty Dozen - the top twelve invasive nonnative plants that are "particularly worrisome" in each Texas ecoregion (see Reference section).



Privet infestation. Photo: Chris Evans, University of Illinois, Bugwood.org

You need not venture too far into Denton County's wild places, like the Lake Lewisville Environmental Learning Area, to see the impact of privet. It's literally everywhere despite substantial efforts to eradicate it. Clusters of white blooms in early spring and dark purple berries in early winter give away its ubiquitous presence. Other times of the year though, it tends to blend in with the rest of the natural flora. In late winter, after the berries have been consumed, younger Chinese privet specimens could be mistaken for the Texas native yaupon holly. The most obvious difference being that privet has opposite branching while the yaupon holly has alternate branching.

A native of Asia, privet was introduced into this country more than a hundred years ago as an ornamental shrub. It continues to be widely available for legal purchase despite being listed as an invasive plant throughout much of the southeastern United States. That may seem counterintuitive, but considering how long privet has been here and how widespread it already is, regulations attempting to control privet by restricting sales may be futile. That's where public education plays an important role.

Privet Control Options

Now that the ecological downside of planting privet has been revealed, what should you do if you already have it in your landscape? Established shrubs are difficult to remove, but the techniques employed during the restoration of natural areas are well-documented using mechanical and/or chemical means (see Reference section). However, since the main source of dispersal is from the fruit, if the flowers or

unripe berries are diligently removed and collected, then the ability of the shrub to escape into the wild can be minimized. For smaller plantings where continuous maintenance is not preferable, then the entire plant including the roots should be removed and the area monitored over the next year or so for seedlings.

Native Alternatives to Privet

Fortunately, there are several Texas native plants that are suitable substitutes for privet in the Denton County area. In addition to the aforementioned yaupon holly, here are a few others that are described in the Native Plant of North America Database, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center (see Reference section):

- Southern Wax Myrtle (*Morella cerifera*)
- Carolina Laurel Cherry (*Prunus caroliniana*)
- Evergreen Sumac (*Rhus virens*)
- Inkberry (*Ilex glabra*)
- Blackhaw Viburnum (*Viburnum prunifolium*)

More recently, a reportedly sterile cultivar of Chinese privet called ‘Sunshine’ has been introduced. This cultivar is touted as not producing flowers or fruit and has bright yellow green foliage that makes it an eye-catching landscape shrub in full sun.

References and More Information

Texas Invasives 101 – Cross Timbers and Prairies Ecoregion “Dirty Dozen Terrestrial Invasive Species” (includes alternative plant options):

https://www.texasinvasives.org/i101/ecoalert_detail.php?ecoregion_id=5

Alabama Cooperative Extension System – Control Options for Chinese Privet

<https://www.aces.edu/blog/topics/control-invasive-plants/control-options-for-chinese-privet/?cn-reloaded=1>

Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center - Native Plants of North America database:

<https://www.wildflower.org/plants-main>

Texas Forest Service – Privet Fact Sheet:

<https://tfsweb.tamu.edu/uploadedFiles/Landowners/Privet.pdf>

USDA National Invasive Species Information Center – Chinese Privet Profile:

<https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/terrestrial/plants/chinese-privet>