

GREEN GONE BAD

FEATURED PLANT: *LESPEDEZA BICOLOR* (SHRUB LESPEDEZA)

Some non-native plants behave badly when they escape from where they are planted. Infestations of these plants have negative impacts on nature. *Lespedeza bicolor*, commonly known as shrub lespedeza, exhibits this characteristic.

Lespedeza bicolor is an upright semi-woody leguminous forb that was introduced from Japan into the United States in the late 1800s. While originally imported as an ornamental, it has since been widely planted to inhibit erosion and provide food and cover for wildlife, especially for northern bobwhite quail.

Lespedeza bicolor is a member of the pea family (Fabaceae) that grows 3 to 10 feet in height with many slender arching branches. Leaves are alternate and have 3 leaflets like many species in the pea family. During June to September many small purple, pink or white pea flowers appear, with single-seeded pods following in August. Seed pods usually hang on until March. Dormant brown plants remain upright most of the winter.



Lespedeza bicolor was originally planted with the best of intentions, however, it is now widely recognized that this plant has become invasive, out-competing beneficial native plants. Once an area has been invaded, dense stands develop, resulting in land that is difficult to access. When *bicolor* spreads, biodiversity is reduced, causing degradation of habitat for native plants and animals. Contrary to popular belief, seed-eating songbirds rarely utilize *Lespedeza bicolor* seeds. Some game birds and small mammals eat bicolor seed, but it is not preferred over the many native legumes often present in natural areas. Prescribed burning, a practice used by woodland managers to improve wildlife habitat and timber stands, actually causes bicolor to spread. Dense stands can increase the fuel load and fire intensity in pine savannas causing possible damage to native plant communities. Burning may kill the top of the plant, but re-sprouting will occur from the root. Because of this, stands of *Lespedeza bicolor* are extremely difficult and expensive to control. *Lespedeza bicolor* seed can remain viable for years in the seed bank.



Infestation in natural area

It may not be widely known among horticulturalists, landscapers, and land managers that *Lespedeza bicolor* infestations can be harmful to natural habitats. Please consider removing this species from your inventory. Also, encourage home and landowners to make sure it does not spread from their property into adjacent woodlands and natural areas. Many native legumes are currently available to address soil erosion and wildlife habitat as well as for landscaping needs. Native alternatives include hairy lespedeza (*Lespedeza hirta*), roundhead lespedeza (*Lespedeza capitata*), slender

lespedeza (*Lespedeza virginica*), partridge pea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*), Florida beggarweed (*Desmodium tortuosum*), showy tick trefoil (*Desmodium canadense*), panicle-leaf trefoil (*Desmodium paniculatum*). Please visit <http://www.invasive.org/browse/subinfo.cfm?sub=3032> for more information.

Photos by James H. Miller (USFS, Bugwood.org)

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