

GREEN GONE BAD

Featured Ornamental Plant: *Euonymus fortunei* (Winter Creeper)

Some exotic ornamental plants behave badly when they escape from the place they are planted. Infestations of these plants have negative impacts on natural environments. One of these plants is *Euonymus fortunei*; common name: Winter Creeper.



Euonymus fortunei is an evergreen perennial vine in the bittersweet family Celastraceae. It is native to China, Japan, and Korea and has been widely planted in the United States as an ornamental. Varieties have been developed for variegated, dark green, or reddish (fall) leaf coloration as well as for varying leaf sizes and growth forms. *Euonymus fortunei* often escapes cultivation and invades natural areas in the eastern United States.



Euonymus fortunei is a vigorous woody vine that grows across the ground and can form a dense groundcover or shrub to 3 feet in height. It also climbs trees 40-70 feet high into the canopy by clinging to the bark with the aid of aerial roots. Typical leaves are opposite, glossy, dark green, oval, slightly toothed, with light-colored veins, about 1-2½ inches long. The leaves may resemble the native Partridge berry (*Mitchella repens*) and the invasive exotic Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) or common periwinkle (*Vinca minor*). Flowers are small and greenish with five petals on long, branched stalks. Stems are green, narrow, warty, and have rootlets or trailing roots. Fruits are small round pink-red capsules that split open to expose seeds with red-orange arils (fleshy edible structures that are fed on by birds and other wildlife which disperse it).



Traits including rapid growth, evergreen nature, and tolerance of harsh conditions enable *Euonymus fortunei* to invade and threaten natural areas. Seeds and root fragments can escape from neglected gardens and are carried by water, to undisturbed forest and riparian areas. *Euonymus fortunei* can out-compete native vegetation by depleting soil moisture and nutrients, blocking sunlight, and by forming a dense vegetative mat that impedes the growth of seedlings of native species. Vines on trees can interfere with photosynthesis. Areas most vulnerable to invasion are disturbed forest openings resulting from human activities, wind-throw, and insect defoliation or fire. It can often be seen in South Carolina in the vicinity of abandoned home sites and along river banks and natural woodlands near urban areas. For removal and control options, please visit this internet page: http://www.na.fs.fed.us/fhp/invasive_plants/weeds/winter_creeper.pdf



Infestation in natural area

It may not be widely known among horticulturalists and landscapers that this plant can be harmful to natural habitats. Please consider removing this species from your inventory. There are several attractive and wildlife friendly native groundcovers that can be sold and planted in its place. Some examples: *Mitchella repens* (partridgeberry, creeping evergreen vine), *Polystichum acrostichoides*, (Christmas fern, evergreen fern), *Hexastylis arifolia* (wild ginger, low perennial), *Chrysogonum virginianum* (green and gold, low clump-forming perennial with lush green foliage and yellow flowers), and *Penstemon digitalis* (smooth white beardtongue, semi-evergreen clump-forming perennial with flowers that are excellent for pollinators).

Please visit <http://www.invasive.org/browse/subinfo.cfm?sub=3024>

See also: <http://www.se-eppc.org/southcarolina/> and <http://www.se-eppc.org/>

