

# The Asheville Bittersweet Sweep

by Dick Bir

The Blue Ridge Parkway is one of our national treasures. This naturally landscaped roadway allows millions of people to view the splendor of the southern mountains in comfort and supplies access to superb highlands hiking. The forested corridor provides interstate respite for drivers passing through Asheville, as well as habitat for wildlife, and it both shelters and affords access to the Mountain-to-Sea hiking trail. This sanctuary is a green bridge between larger parts of the surrounding mountain national forests as well.

Recently this beautiful Parkway corridor has come under attack. Pine bark beetles, gypsy moths, adelgids and invasive plants are among the exotic invasive threats to this jewel in the Department of Interior's crown. During fall, when visitors arrive in droves to admire the vibrant colors, nothing is more noticeable among the attackers than Oriental bittersweet, *Celastrus orbiculatus*. This prolific woody vine can be seen draping trees and strangling and smothering shrubs, threatening the very existence of native azaleas, mountain laurels and wildflowers. Oriental bittersweet's golden fruit husks open to display the deep red-orange fruits, as the foliage turns a clear, bright yellow. Multitudes of seedlings grow under trees tightly wrapped in bittersweet. As a result, for a few weeks it is easy to spot Oriental bittersweet, although removing it and liberating the native flora is more of a problem.

Unfortunately, these threats have arrived in an era when resources within the Department of Interior are stretched thin. Fortunately, however, Jane Hargreaves, who lives near the Parkway and regularly hikes the Mountain-to-Sea trail, noticed the increase in bittersweet and the negative effect it was having on her beloved native mountain flora. She formed a group of concerned citizens, the Asheville Weed Team, to do something about the problem. Under the direction of Dr. Chris Ulrey, botanist for the Blue Ridge Parkway, they mapped a strategy to dramatically decrease the Oriental bittersweet population along the Asheville corridor of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

This relatively small but dedicated group of volunteers met at Parkway headquarters on the foggy, drizzly Saturday morning of October 26, 2002. They were trained in plant identification, which was easy since there was only one target



Jill M. Swearingen, U.S. National Park Service

plant. Each volunteer was issued a bright orange vest provided by the North Carolina Arboretum, instructed in safety including how far to stay off the paved road, separated into work groups and then assigned an area to weed. There was a licensed pesticide applicator in each group who was the only one allowed to apply the triclopyr used on cut stems when bittersweet vines were too large to be hand pulled (some were 4 or more inches in diameter).

It was wet, dirty work but also very satisfying. College professors and students worked side by side with botanists, bakers, nurserywomen, environmentalists, retirees and landscapers. All we had in common was a love for the parkway and the native flora that was being smothered by the invasive exotic Oriental bittersweet. We worked most of the day...to sweaty exhaustion for most of us.

We know that we have made a dramatic impact but also know that there is a tremendous seed bank and that we did not get every Oriental bittersweet seedling. We have no illusions that what we have done is a permanent change, but what we have done is give the existing native azaleas, mountain laurels, spice bushes, sweetshrubs and spring ephemerals a chance. We hope to return to give them an even better chance in the future. The group has planned a similar weed pull at the Western North Carolina Nature Center in late winter and they are meeting regularly to discuss how to accomplish their common goal of freeing their home city of invasive exotic plants.

An interesting spin-off of this unpublicized activity is that in the process of organizing the bittersweet sweep, Jane talked with Julie Ball, a reporter for the Asheville Citizen-Times newspaper. Ms. Ball wrote a feature article on Oriental bittersweet and the problems it presents. The Associated Press picked up the article and within a few days the bittersweet story had made its way to Winston-Salem and Raleigh newspapers. Reports have come that her bittersweet feature appeared in newspapers from the Wall Street Journal to South Georgia. When you start controlling invasives, you never know where the trail will lead.

For more information on this species, go to: [www.nps.gov/plants/alien/fact/ceor1.htm](http://www.nps.gov/plants/alien/fact/ceor1.htm) or [www.tncweeds.ucdavis.edu/esadocs/celaorbi.html](http://www.tncweeds.ucdavis.edu/esadocs/celaorbi.html)

For more information, contact Dick Bir, NC-EPPC, at [dick\\_bir@ncsu.edu](mailto:dick_bir@ncsu.edu)



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