

GREEN GONE BAD

FEATURED ORNAMENTAL PLANT: *ELAEAGNUS PUNGENS* (THORNY OLIVE, SILVERTHORN)

Some exotic ornamental plants behave badly when they escape from the place they are planted. Infestations of these plants have negative impacts on nature. One of these plants is *Elaeagnus pungens*; common name: Thorny Olive or Silverthorn.



Elaeagnus pungens is a dense evergreen shrub in the family Elaeagnaceae (not a true olive). The native range of *Elaeagnus pungens* is Eastern Asia. It was introduced in the U.S. as an ornamental plant in 1830. It has been frequently planted in hedgerows and on highway right-of-ways and is also used for landscaping. It has escaped ornamental plantings and begun to spread into natural areas in the midlands and coastal plains of South Carolina. An example of a severe infestation can be seen at The Audubon Society Wannamaker Preserve on the north side of Hwy.6, five miles east of Saint Matthews, S.C. A project to control this infestation is ongoing by members of the Columbia Audubon Society in order to improve habitats for native birds and restore the native plant community.

Elaeagnus pungens shrubs typically have multiple stems and very dense branches with long shoots extending from the top. Twigs are brown with brown scales and hairy when young. The leaves are alternate, oval to elliptical, with irregular wavy margins and silvery surfaces especially underneath, 2-4 inches in length and thick. Axillary clusters of small, sweet-smelling, white to brown flowers develop in the fall. Fruit are small, red, dotted with small brown scales and develop in the spring. Thorny Olive resembles two other exotic olives, autumn olive and Russian olive which also have silvery foliage. It also can take the form of a climbing plant, growing over and shading out other plants. The name Silverthorn, comes from the thorns on its branches.



Elaeagnus pungens often becomes a problem when it escapes from planted landscapes into natural areas. Because Thorny Olive is a fast-growing, weedy ornamental, it can grow and thrive in a variety of conditions, and can tolerate shade, drought, and salt. Mammals and birds disperse seed, widening its area of distribution. Reproduction also occurs via stem sprouts. Silverthorn can spread and climb into trees, leading to the displacement of native vegetation. When established, an infestation reduces biodiversity, wildlife habitat quality, available forage, and native insect life.

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 and gardens. There are several native shrubs that can be sold and planted in its place. These include the evergreens *Morella cerifera* (wax myrtle), *Ilex vomitoria* (yaupon holly), *Ilex glabra* (inkberry), *Ilex opaca* (American holly), *Baccharis halimifolia* (groundsel tree), *Osmanthus americanus* (wild olive or devilwood), *Kalmia latifolia* (mountain laurel), or *Leucothoe fontanesiana* (highland doghobble).



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