



2002 PRIVET PULL & MICROSTEGIUM MASSACRE

by Jim Allison
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Rivers Alive is Georgia's annual volunteer river cleanup event, held throughout the month of October and sponsored by the Adopt-A-Stream Program of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and the Keep Georgia Beautiful Program of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. This past October, in return for free commemorative T-shirts, some 15,764 volunteers collected more than a quarter of a million pounds of trash from in and along the state's waterways. And for the third year in a row, some of the solid waste removed was of the biological kind: Chinese privet (*Ligustrum sinense*).

Chinese privet was introduced to the US from China in 1852 for use as a hardy, fast-growing, evergreen hedge and privacy screen (the words *privet*, *privacy*, and yes, *privy*, all derive from the same Latin root). It quickly began to spread beyond anyone's control, as its fruits—like miniatures of its relative, the olive—were eaten by songbirds and spread far and wide. Over time, it forms very dense stands and out-competes virtually all other species. Typically it gradually forms a solid understory beneath a forest canopy, but without intervention eventually even the canopy trees are doomed, as they—like wildflowers and native shrubs—cannot reproduce in the dense shade of privet's evergreen foliage. Today it is infesting stream banks and woodlands, even rock outcrops, at least as far west as Texas and as far north as Connecticut (the PLANTS Database: <http://plants.usda.gov/plants/>).

October 2000: On the morning of Saturday, October 14, 2000, the Georgia Exotic Pest Plant Council and Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNRA - National Park Service) held the first annual **Rivers Alive Privet**

Pull, at one of the CRNRA units in Cobb County, Paces Mill Park. In inviting the GA-EPPC membership to the event, I cautioned, "No, we will not end the problem of invasive species. Would picking up trash mean an end to our problems with litter? That is not the goal! But . . . we can make a real difference at this first—demonstration—site. The privet is spaced far enough apart that we can hope to effect some release of native vegetation, once the competition from the evil evergreen is removed. What's more, we can hope to inspire others to do something similar or better in the future, there and elsewhere. We can help get the message out that more than one exotic plant is taking over our state (not just kudzu!). We can make a few more people recognize that pollution is not only things like solid waste, but also takes the form of *biological pollution*."

Our first *Privet Pull* was successful: we had [exactly!] enough T-shirts to go around. An even better sign of success: *Privet Pull 2000* served as the inspiration for multiple similar events, beginning the following February at Panola Mountain

State Conservation Park, the month after that at a park in the City of Decatur, and new "pulls" every year since (such as at Rock and Shoals State Natural Area and the Chattahoochee Nature Center). Paces Mill Park has been the site of a GA-EPPC/CRNRA *Rivers Alive Privet Pull* on a Saturday morning each of the last three Octobers and the reduction of the privet component there has been dramatic.

October 2001: While the limited goals of the premiere *Privet Pull* were clearly accomplished, a site inspection prior to the 2001 event showed that not all the results were salutary. Although it was a pleasure to note several native wildflowers we had not noticed the year before, probably rebounding due to more sunlight reaching the forest floor, it appeared that one of the prime beneficiaries had been a different alien pest plant: *Microstegium vimineum*. This is an Asian grass graced with an amazing number of common names, none of them quite as well known as its scientific name (see the Winter 2002 issue of *Wildland Weeds* for an article on this shade-tolerant exotic). During the 2001 event we added the bag-

ging of *Microstegium* as an alternate activity and removed a large quantity. But, knowing the large number of seeds that would have been retained in the seed bank, we decided that in 2002 we would begin to mount a more systematic attack on this noxious annual.

In the summer of 2002 I helped an intern with the CRNRA, Michelle Aldizer, to locate some populations, within the CRNRA and along the Chattahoochee River, of two native, shade-tolerant perennial grasses in the genus *Chasmanthium*, *C. latifolium* and *C. sessiliflorum*. The former is familiar to many as “river oats” and the latter is a smaller-flowered cousin. Both are common species in habitats similar to those at Paces Mill Park. Prior to the 2002 Pull, Michelle collected some live plants of each *Chasmanthium* by thinning some of the densest natural colonies we had found. She also collected seed, which the Atlanta Botanical Garden has agreed to grow up for planting during the 2003 event. Because the two native grasses are good competitors in low woodlands, are perennial, start growth early in the season and are much taller than *Microstegium*, they should be able to at least hold their ground against it, and as more and more of the native is planted and, I hope, reseeds, the *Microstegium* should dwindle proportionately.

October 2002: On the morning of Saturday, October 19, 2002 more than 40 volunteers showed up to pull privet, bag *Microstegium*, and plant *Chasmanthium*. As with the previous Pulls, a major share of the credit goes to Dr. Wayne Morris and his students at North Georgia College and State University, who constituted a core of young people full of energy and with strong or at least still-flexible backs (those of us over 50 remember those days). In 2002 they were joined by an equally dedicated contingent from Georgia Tech, by staff from the CRNRA, and by some concerned citizens. In just a few hours we removed a record amount of privet (destined to be chipped into mulch), bagged a truckload of *Microstegium*, and made a start toward native grass restoration. Everyone found it fun and rewarding (well, at least no one had a word of complaint). I hope you'll consider joining in during next October's *Privet Pull and Microstegium Massacre*, or better yet, organize a similar event closer to your own neighborhood!

You can contact Jim Allison, Past President, Georgia Exotic Pest Plant Council at the Georgia Natural Heritage Program, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 2117 U.S. Highway 278, SE, Social Circle, GA 30025 or by e-mail at Jim_Allison@dnr.state.ga.us



Uprooted Chinese privet.



Trading a native for a nuisance: *Chasmanthium* for *Microstegium*.



Planting *Chasmanthium*.