



American Bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*)

Importance

American Bittersweet is a vine native to eastern North America. This plant is a food source for many birds and an indicator of a better than average natural habitat, as it struggles in highly disturbed areas.

Identification

This climbing vine has grayish brown bark, alternate leaves, small white flowers and in late summer produces its iconic fruit. The fruit are gathered in clumps at ends of branches (similar to grapes), with each berry surrounded by an orange capsule.



American Bittersweet fruit

Photo by Peter Gorman
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Natural History

American Bittersweet vines can reach 2-3 inches in diameter and over 60 feet tall (reaching the forest canopy!). The twining vine can even suppress the growth of the trees that support it. This plant is commonly found statewide in a variety of habitats from forest to prairie. Its range spans the eastern two thirds of the United States and Canada.

Oriental Bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus* – Non-native invasive)

Oriental Bittersweet (OBS) was brought from Asia to the United States as an ornamental plant. It has escaped ornamental plantings and is found across eastern United States where it is now considered invasive. In Minnesota, OBS has mostly been found in the Twin Cities metro and southeast MN, with some records in the Duluth area.

Identification

OBS looks very similar to American Bittersweet, which is why it wasn't noticed as a problem in Minnesota until around 2010. The main difference between the two plants are the size of the vine and the color and location of the fruit. Oriental Bittersweet vines can reach up to 8 inches in diameter and have orange fruit with yellow-orange capsules that are located all along leafing branches.

The Problem

Like American Bittersweet, OBS vines can reach the canopy of mature trees, however due to OBS's larger diameter, the weight of these vines can strangle the tree, break upper canopy branches and end up actually killing trees. When found in high densities, OBS can also create an impenetrable thicket, limiting wildlife movements and shading out native plants.



Oriental Bittersweet fruit

Photo by
Three Rivers Park District

Birds eat the fruit of both of these species and deposit seeds throughout the landscape. However, humans also help in the spread of OBS by collecting the fruiting vines for decorations and then discarding them in the woods or compost pile. Do not collect any type of bittersweet for decoration!

Control

OBS can be controlled by cutting vines near their base and treating the stump with an approved herbicide. This is ideal for vines larger than 1" in diameter, since smaller vines can be pulled. Special caution is taken when removing OBS so seeds are not spread beyond already invaded area. It often takes several years of resprout and seedling control to fully remove OBS populations.

What is Three Rivers doing?

Three Rivers conducts surveys of bittersweet vines in our parks to identify locations of both species. We work to protect American Bittersweet populations and eradicate Oriental Bittersweet, using volunteers to identify problem areas and Natural Resources Management staff or contractors to conduct removals.

What can you do?

Continue learning about the benefits of native species and why invasive species are a problem – don't forget to share this knowledge with others! Wear your zipper pull to start a conversation. Three Rivers also needs volunteers to survey for bittersweet and other invasive species, join invasive species removal events and support educational programs related to invasive species. You can also report Oriental Bittersweet and other invasive species sightings to EDDmapS (www.eddmaps.org).