

# OP/ED

## CONSERVATION CORNER

# Invasive plants are taking their toll

On June 14, Dr. John Nelson, curator for the University of South Carolina Herbarium, made a statement that will be shocking to most: "Invasive plants are a bigger threat than climate change." Dr. Nelson is in the Department of Biological Sciences at USC.

We will not debate here the severity of climate change, but we can take a virtual stroll through Spartanburg and see what we can see about his invasive plant warning. Do we have a problem? Is it serious? How serious?

If a native tree could talk and walk, what would it say to us about the hazards of invasive plants as we seek facts and conclusions, and what would this mobile tree show us to affirm its warnings?

The first comment from our host tree would probably be "Kudzu is killing me!" On the north side of Heywood Avenue, we see curtains of kudzu blanketing and killing tall trees. In fact, kudzu is all around us — along all traffic corridors, in our parks, and even crowding our trails such as the Rail Trail, Cottonwood, River Birch, etc. Almost all neighborhoods have it, smothering trees just about everywhere.

One forest ranger says, "Kudzu is eating my forest."

Our imaginary, walking tree guide would hasten to point out that other invasive vines are tree killers as well. "While kudzu is the most visible vine in Spartanburg, wisteria, English ivy and honeysuckle can also be harmful to us trees."

"Alas," says our host tree, "vines are not the worst invasives we native trees face. Invasive trees are an even bigger problem! The Chinese parasol tree quickly takes over entire areas." In about 10 acres along Woodburn Road, the **Trees Coalition** and neighbors



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removed more than 5,000 parasol trees in 2016.

"The worse invasive tree in Spartanburg is probably tree of heaven, misnamed by the Japanese because it grew so fast they said it was growing to heaven. We trees call it 'tree from hell.' See, it is all over the county and quickly grows to heights towering over the good trees. Seeds are spread by the wind and by floating down waterways."

Bamboo is deadly to native trees. Our tree guide points out that no native trees survive in a mature patch of bamboo.

He points out that we have not covered other invasive trees such as mimosa, princess, Bradford pear and chinaberry, and we have not discussed non-native shrubs such as privet, leatherleaf mahonia and elaeagnus.

"Clearly and visibly," our walking and talking native tree explains, "invasive plants are taking their toll. Whether or not you humans believe in climate change, we trees definitely have many serious threats. You humans brought every one of the aforementioned plagues here. You did it to us."

"What are the consequences?" we ask our woody guide. He responds, "Native trees can be host to more than 300 native insects and living things, which have learned to thrive in and on the tree, its leaves, its fruit, its stem and its roots. Typically non-native invasive trees are hosts to eight or fewer native insect species.

The impact is widespread — loss of native trees, ecological damage to native habitats, harm to native insects and animal species, and extinction of native plants and birds."

The answer to the issue Dr. Nelson raises is that invasive plants are clearly very serious threats.

Is the situation hopeless? Not if we wake up to the dangers of invasive plants, educate ourselves, learn identification and do something about them. The Trees Coalition has 184 sites in the county, including 39 places where kudzu has been eradicated. Each one is a tiny bit of proof that we can make a difference. Unfortunately, only about 6 to 8 percent of what needs to be done has been done so far.

At 9 a.m. each Wednesday, Coalition volunteers meet at Hatcher Garden to help concerned citizens learn how to identify these "bad guys" and how to remove them. Actual hands-on training and removal protocols are demonstrated.

Your response is vital to our trees, to the neighborhoods, to the environment and to your grandchildren. You can make a difference!

To guard against invasive trees in your yard and community, plant a native tree to celebrate Arbor Day. Climate determines the best time to do so in any given area. South Carolina's planting season begins in December and ends in mid-March. According to South Carolina law, the first Friday in December is observed as Arbor Day. Visit this link for more tree information: [www.state.sc.us/forest/urban.htm](http://www.state.sc.us/forest/urban.htm)

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