

## What's the Big Deal About Non-native Plants?

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In the 1930's and again in the 1950's, during periods of drought, an elm tree native to Asia, the Siberian elm (often mistakenly called the Chinese elm) was planted extensively throughout the Great Plains. Prior to that, in 1876, the vining plant called kudzu was brought to America and introduced at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. Again, starting in the mid 1930s farmers in the south were encouraged to plant it to help control soil erosion. It's rapid growth and nitrogen fixing ability was desirable for improving depleted soil and simply helping to hold the soil in place.

Both of these events are shining examples of human arrogance. What we now know is that once any plant is moved out of its native ecosystem, it can, not always but it can, be like letting the genie out of the bottle. Without the natural controls of its native ecosystem, whether those controls be weather, insects or disease, a plant can proliferate and become a real nuisance. Human arrogance comes into play in the fact that they thought it could be controlled or the people involved in promoting it failed to consider undesirable consequences of what they had done!

Now let's fast forward to today and we are still making the same mistakes! Ornamental pears (Bradford pears or callery pears) were all the rage in urban landscaping in the 1970s up to very recently. As more cultivars, other than Bradfords, started being used, these once fruitless ornamentals started bearing fruit. The birds readily eat the fruit and "planted" trees everywhere. The volunteer pears are terribly invasive! We need to stop planting them and start replacing them with flowering crabapples instead.

We used to suggest bush honeysuckle, native to Asia, in home landscapes and as a wildlife plant. Again, wildlife readily eat the small red berries of this shrub and it then get's planted everywhere they stop. If you look around the woodlands right now and see lots of lush green shrubs, that's all bush honeysuckle. As it moves in to woodlands it starts to crowd out all the native species and interrupts the normal re-establishment of native hardwood trees. We need to start removing these shrubs from the woodlands and home landscapes.

Crownvetch has been heavily used on roadside plantings for the past thirty or more years to control soil erosion. It's worked very well, in fact too well. It is now moving off of roadsides and into pastures, often crowding out the native desirable species and pasture managers are having to spray it as it enters their property just to keep it from getting worse.

What does all of this mean to you? As you think about plants you want to put in your home landscape or for wildlife plantings, be very careful in what you choose. Just because it looks pretty or is touted as having no insect problems, no disease problems, etc.(usually not correct by the way) don't just rush out and buy it. Ask some questions from someone not trying to sell it to you. Ask me if it is a potential problem. Ask for recommendations of what to plant in certain locations or for certain purposes.

There's an old proverb that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure and it is so very true. It's a lot easier and less hassle to prevent a problem, than to fix a problem. We'll be fighting volunteer elm trees, pampas grass, bush honeysuckle, crownvetch and many other plants for the rest of our lives. We have enough problems out there, let's not make it worse by planting new non-native, potentially invasive, species!