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Tackling invasives



by MARIA ZAMPINI

This will avoid the “I think” opinion and instead ultimately provide “we know” answers that will have the research, data and backup to accompany the recommendation.

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As I stood in the kitchen on a recent mid-May afternoon, whipping up a batch of my Uncle George's Goopy Buns for dinner, I listened to and watched the lightning, thunder and rainfall. And fall. And fall. It is an understatement to say it has been a wet spring. Flooding is rampant everywhere. It's the rainiest April on record in Ohio, and it appears, as I write this, that May wants to have a similar title of its own. Weather is one of the factors our green industry has no choice but to endure. It is uncontrollable, and it's something we can only react to, not plan for.

This brings me to today's focus, which is invasive plants. Invasives are another facet of Mother Nature that have, or will eventually, affect all of us. Although, unlike rain, I think the problem is something we can control—at least to some degree—if we choose to be proactive and not reactive in dealing with it.

First, though, I must share that one of the best mentors in my life has been R. James Schroeder, former owner of Agora Gardens in Madison, Ohio. Mr. Schroeder is highly regarded for his vast horticultural experience and prowess. He is almost as equally well known for his unique pearls of wisdom known as “Schroederisms.” I employed one in this column last month: “Eat the toad first thing in the morning.” For the topic of invasives, I offer up this gem: “If you let the camel get his nose under the tent, before you know it, it's in the tent.” Be a little patient and you shall see, grasshopper, how camels and invasives go together.

Next, I want to say I understand the core issue at stake in regard to invasives. The U.S. National Arboretum defines the situation very simply: An invasive plant has the ability to thrive and spread aggressively outside its natural range. Invasives can cause costly economic and ecological damage. And if the world was perfect, invasives would be identified when they first start spreading, before they get out of control, and in enough time to do something about them so that the cost for eradication is reasonable.

Unfortunately, nothing in this world is perfect, is it? In recent years, the invasive campaign heated up and took a foothold on the East Coast and, like the settlers, continues to move westward. At its roots (bad pun, I know), I believe it became this trendy cause championed by, for lack of a better word, “outsiders” who had political connections but did not have all the facts to make an informed decision. I still view it as a snowball heading downhill, growing and gaining momentum.

To some degree, I think the invasive uprising caught our industry unaware; in essence, it was a camel and before we knew it, it was in the tent. There were people in the tent with the camel making decisions that would directly affect our industry, but in some ways we were left on the outside looking in.

Depending on where you live in the U.S., this topic may be pretty hot or it may only be lukewarm. Even so, it is likely to become hotter sooner rather than later. Like natives, I think it goes hand-in-hand with sustainability and greening and is not just a trend; it's here to stay.

I believe it is fruitful to encourage an open dialogue with those in the thick of the invasives issue. For example, the Ohio Nursery and Landscape Association is a part of the Ohio Invasive Plants Council and has made sure there is a cross section of industry, government and community representation along with members from all sectors of our state. Many, including Mark Gilson, president of Gilson Gardens Inc., Perry; Steve Foltz, horticulture director at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden; Keith Manbeck, manager of PlantHaven Inc.; Jim Chatfield, Ohio State University associate professor and extension specialist; and Teresa Culley, professor of biological sciences at the University of Cincinnati, are representing us well. Using Michigan as a model, the group is working toward establishing protocol that will scientifically determine what is invasive and what isn't. This will avoid the “I think” opinion and instead ultimately provide “we know” answers

that will have the research, data and back-up to accompany the recommendation.

Those talking about invasives need to be careful what they wish for—specifically, more sterile plants that can't spread. My dad has this interesting book titled *Safe Sex in the Garden (and Other Propositions for an Allergy-Free World)* by Thomas Leo Ogren. His book tells of Dutch elm disease killing off almost all the American elms. Elms have perfect flowers (both male and female parts on the same flower), are insect-pollinated and shed small amounts of pollen. Their replacements in many cases were high pollen-producing, wind-pollinated trees, and a huge number of these were male clones. As we all know, pollen causes allergies, asthma, sinus conditions, headaches and many other serious health problems. At the time, it was common to cut down the female trees because they were "dirty."

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Ogren declares that this unnatural selection has taken its toll by leaving us with increased urban pollen. The excess pollen from males floats about looking for a moist, sticky, electrically charged target. With fewer female trees available, the next best thing is the human! We emit an electrical charge, and our mucous membranes (our eyes, skin, and in particular the linings of our nose and throat) now trap this wayward pollen, so we're the target.

Looking forward, if the pollen doesn't get you, the snowball could. It's crucial the green industry is part of the invasive plants regulation process to be assured there is sound science behind which plants go on your state's invasive species list. If you don't help determine which plants are declared invasive, then someone else is going to do it for you. And that someone else may not give a hill of beans what economic impact their decision has on you or your business.

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