

Project aims to eradicate pesky Asian plant

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Pernicious privet

By **Lee Shearer** | lee.shearer@onlineathens.com | Story updated at 1:09 AM on Wednesday, October 19, 2005

Hikers at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia and the Sandy Creek Nature Center soon could be able to see what a natural Southern bottomland forest looks like, thanks to a U.S. Forest Service research project.

The project's purpose is to study the best way to remove Chinese privet, a forest-killing plant that's become a scourge at places like Sandy Creek and the botanical garden, where it's threatening not only to take over, but to choke out all other plants in those forests.

"Kudzu gets all the press and glory, but ecologically, privet is a lot worse," said Scott Horn, one of the forest service entomologists working on the project.

Some scientists even use terms like "bioterrorism" or "nuclear warfare" to describe privet's impact on the ecosystems it invades.

Popular for 150 years as a landscaping shrub - it forms the famous Sanford Stadium hedges - privet has taken off in recent years, said project leader Jim Hanula of the Forest Service's Southern Research Station in Athens.

Once privet gets established, it forms dense thickets beneath forest trees, crowding out every other kind of understory plant. But privet kills the big plants, too. When acorns fall from the big trees above and sprout, the seedlings can't get any sunshine because of the dense green blanket the privet forms, Horn explained.

And when tornadoes, old age or insects sooner or later topple the big old trees, there are no young ones to replace them, and the forest becomes a "monoculture," nothing but privet. That's what's happening at an ever-increasing pace at places like the nature center and the botanical garden.

Privet has become so common at Sandy Creek, most people think it's part of the natural vegetation and don't notice it, said Sandy Creek Nature Center Facilities Supervisor Randy Smith.

The hedge plant infects many nature centers, and some put a lot of money and time into getting rid of the stubborn weed.

But Smith has made a conscious choice to use volunteers and dollars to educate the public rather than removing privet, he said.

Like others who've walked Sandy Creek's trails over the years, he's seen privet and other invasive plants crowd out the native plants at an accelerating rate.

That's why Smith gave a little inner cheer Tuesday morning as he watched a \$100,000 machine called a GyroTrac eat up the privet on a 5-acre tract at the nature center. The little Canadian-made marvel knocked over the privet and chewed it up, spitting it out as mulch from both fore and aft.

Published in the Athens Banner-Herald on 101905

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Story Photos



U.S. Forest Service technician Chris Crowe walks over mulched privet on a forest floor Tuesday at Sandy Creek Nature Center. GFA LandClearing used a mulcher to chew up the forest-choking exotic plant and USFS technicians followed behind to cut and spray privet the machine couldn't access. Scott Horn, a USFS entomologist, said privet has pretty much taken over the park's forest and several other exotic species also are present.

Allen Sullivan/Staff

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Privet is particularly widespread in Georgia's Piedmont region, and also has moved into mountain areas. It's less common in the Coastal Plain region of south Georgia and north Florida, Horn said.

"People who don't work on these trails don't understand how exciting it is to see this machine shredding privet like it does. It's a real source of satisfaction," Smith said.

Surprisingly, the GyroTrac didn't chew up dirt as a machine like a Bobcat might, so even right after the treatment, the forest floor, covered with a thin layer of privet mulch, looked a lot more like what the bottomlands might have looked like a century ago.

"Today, we don't even have a concept of what an open forest looks like," Smith said.

The research project actually is comparing two techniques of privet removal on 5-acre test sites at not only the botanical garden and nature center, but in Greene County at the University of Georgia's Watson Springs Forest and in the Oconee National Forest near Scull Shoals.

At each site, the GyroTrac machine, owned and operated by GFA Land Clearing of Tifton and Palm Bay, Fla., is removing 5 acres of privet. On another 5 acres at each site, skilled crews of workers are removing privet with hand tools, leaving behind stumps, logs and branches rather than a layer of mulch. In both the machine- and hand-worked sites, workers also are applying herbicides to the stumps and leaves that are left, immediately after the removal and again next year. Five acres are designated as "control" areas, where the privet is left intact.

Hanula's Forest Service research unit also studies insects and diseases in Southern forests, but invasive plant species have become a much bigger problem in recent years. A few years ago, about 20 percent of the unit's research was on invasive plants; now, it's 60 percent, Hanula said.

The 10-year privet project aims not only to study which method of removing the shrub is better, but how Chinese privet affects tree growth, the abundance and types of native animals such as snakes, reptiles and mammals, and how well native plants can recover once privet is removed, Hanula said.

The treatments may restore 40 acres to something closer to a natural state, at least for a while, but Hanula doesn't hold out much hope that actual removal of privet can be a long-term solution to remove the noxious weed. There's just too much of it.

He has more hope for "biocontrols," finding an insect, fungus or other creature that could prey on privet.

Because the plant has no close relatives that are native to the United States, scientists have a good chance of finding some predator that will eat or infect privet, but not other more desirable plants, he said.

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