



## **The Wheelbarrow of Shame**

March. We're starting to plant seeds, while waiting impatiently for the garden centers to set out their stock and open their doors for spring planting. You've had the winter to dream and plan, and you're ready to landscape a neglected area or redesign an existing bed. Off you go, maybe with a detailed list, maybe just planning to buy whatever looks good.

But not so fast. While garden clubs and conservation organizations have been talking up the importance of native plants and biodiversity, your local garden centers haven't necessarily gotten the memo. Like every other retailer, they select their offerings based on what will sell. Unfortunately, noxious plants can remain legal to sell for years, even decades after their negative effects have been identified. It's up to us, the customers, to avoid non-natives and invasive species, and just as critically, to ask for more environmentally sound choices.

Herewith, some of the worst offenders in the wheelbarrow of shame:

First up, four of the most common, and most invasive, groundcovers. English ivy, periwinkle (myrtle), ajuga (bugleweed) and Japanese pachysandra are sold just about everywhere. They're evergreen, pretty (with the possible exception of pachysandra, which I've always considered a coarse, ugly and supremely dull plant), and of course, fast-growing. This last trait, obviously, is the reason they're on the 'naughty' list. Previous owners planted all four on my property, and all have spread far beyond their original locations. Ajuga has appropriated large swathes of lawn, ivy mounts an annual campaign to pull down my house's north wall, and both vinca and pachysandra are marching ever deeper into my woods. As they spread they replace biodiversity with monoculture and crowd out the local species on which local insects and birds depend, while offering little in return.

What to buy instead? You have more choices than you may have realized. Canadian wild ginger grows low to the ground with shiny rounded leaves. The common blue violet isn't quite evergreen, but its shiny leaves and delicate spring flowers more than make up for it. Green and gold is another native groundcover, with a bonus, as the name suggests, of small gold flowers. Evergreen bearberry has white-pink flowers in spring and red berries in the fall. Virginia creeper spreads quickly and supports a large number of native creatures, and its leaves turn bright red in fall, making it a desirable

addition to the landscape, with some caveats: the berries are toxic, and the sap can cause skin irritation, so wear gloves if you need to cut or pull it. (Unlike poison ivy, merely brushing against it isn't a problem.)

Topping your list of flowering trees to avoid should be the Bradford or Callery pear. These midsize, fast-growing trees with white spring flowers have been a favorite of landscapers for too long; the results of their prolific self-seeding now choke fields, woodlands, and roadsides. Recognizing the evil, our state legislature has banned their sale after October 1, 2027. The delay is a favor to garden centers, allowing them time to sell off their existing stock—a split-the-baby approach worthy of Solomon. They'll probably be at clearance prices, but they're no bargain, so keep on walking. While you're walking, walk right past Norway maple, a prolific non-native that crowds out our native varieties.

If you're looking for frothy white spring-flowering trees, forget the pears. Choose our native shadbush, dogwood, or even mountain laurel, our Connecticut state flower. Besides early-season blossoms, all of these natives will produce berries that support local wildlife.

The unfortunate legacy of invasive shrubs is visible in virtually every neighborhood. For decades, homeowners planted burning bush for its bright red fall color, privet for hedging, and thorny barberry for its supposed burglar deterrence. Regrettably, all went on to plant themselves in staggering abundance. I've been in forests filled with acres of burning bush, and endlessly fight barberry in my own back yard. I believe that barberry and privet have finally been banned from commercial sale, but garden clubs and other community groups, unaware of their status, may still offer them; if you see them, tactfully educate the sellers. Pressure from growers has kept burning bush legal, even though there are so many native shrubs that offer comparable fall color: start with blueberries; viburnum; chokeberry (aronia), and highbush cranberry.

Ready to trade in your wheelbarrow of shame? A good place to start is at the Connecticut River Coastal Conservation District website, <https://conservect.org/ctrivercoastal>, and click on "Plant sale." They have just published the inventory for their annual sale of native plants. It's strictly by advance order (no walk-ins) and orders are due by April 6, so check it out now.