

Japanese Honeysuckle

Japanese honeysuckle is a perennial woody vine of the honeysuckle family that climbs by twisting its stems around vertical structures, including limbs and trunks of shrubs and small trees. It spreads by seeds, underground rhizomes, and above ground runners. Long distance dispersal is by birds and other wildlife that readily eat the fruits and defecate the seeds in other locations.

Leaves are oblong to oval, sometimes lobed, have short stalks, and occur in pairs along the stem. Flowers are tubular, with five fused petals, white to pink, turning yellow with age, very fragrant, and occur in pairs along the stem at leaf junctures. Stems and leaves are sometimes covered with fine, soft hairs. Japanese honeysuckle blooms from late April through July and sometimes into October. Small black fruits with 2 to 3 dark brown seeds are produced in the fall.

Japanese honeysuckle damages forest communities by out competing native vegetation for light, nutrients and moisture and by changing forest structure. The vines overtop adjacent vegetation by twining about, and completely covering, small trees and shrubs. As it becomes established it forms a dense blanket that endangers most shrubs, herbs, and trees.



Japanese honeysuckle has few natural enemies which allows it to spread widely and out-compete native plant species.. Shrubs and young trees can be killed by girdling when vines twist tightly around stems and trunks, cutting off the flow of water through the plant. Dense growths of honeysuckle covering vegetation can gradually kill plants by blocking sunlight from reaching their leaves. Vigorous root competition also helps Japanese honeysuckle spread and displace neighboring native vegetation. It thrives in a wide variety of habitats including fields, forests, wetlands, barrens, and all types of disturbed lands.

The plant is native to East Asia, including Japan and Korea and was introduced to the United States in the early 1800's as an ornamental plant, for erosion control, and for wildlife forage and cover.

Several effective methods of control are available for Japanese honeysuckle, including chemical and non-chemical, depending on the extent of the infestation and available time and labor.

For small patches, repeated pulling of entire vines and root systems may be effective. Hand pull seedlings and young plants when the soil is moist, holding low on the stem to remove the whole plant along with its roots. Monitor frequently and remove any new plants. Cut and remove twining vines to prevent them from girdling and killing shrubs and other plants. An effective method for removal of patches of honeysuckle covering the ground is to lift up and hold a portion of the vine mass with a rake and have a chain saw operator cut the stems low to the ground. Mowing large patches of honeysuckle may be useful if repeated regularly but is most effective when combined with herbicide application (see below). Mow at least twice a year, first in mid-July and again in mid-September. Plants can also be grubbed out using a pulaski or similar digging tool, taking care to remove all roots and runners. Burning removes above ground vegetation but does not kill the underground rhizomes, which will continue to sprout. In certain situations, tethered goats have been used to remove honeysuckle growth.

In central Indiana, Japanese honeysuckle leaves continue to photosynthesize long after most other plants have lost their leaves. This allows for application of herbicides when many native species are dormant. However, for effective control with herbicides, healthy green leaves must be present at application time and temperatures must be sufficient for plant activity. Several systemic herbicides (e.g., glyphosate and triclopyr) move through the plant to the roots when applied to the leaves or stems and have been used effectively on Japanese honeysuckle.

Following label guidelines, apply a 2.5% rate of glyphosate (e.g., Rodeo® for wetlands; Roundup® for uplands) mixed with water and an appropriate surfactant, to foliage from spring through fall. Alternatively, apply a 2% concentration of triclopyr (e.g., Garlon 3A) plus water to foliage, thoroughly wetting the leaves but not to the point of drip-off. A coarse, low-pressure spray should be used. Repeat applications may be needed. Treatment in the fall, when many non-target plants are going dormant, is best. Also, a 25% glyphosate or triclopyr solution mixed with water can be applied to cut stem surfaces any time of year as long as the ground is not frozen.

Several native plants are logical alternatives to plant in place of Japanese Honeysuckle. One of the prettiest is Trumpet Honeysuckle pictured below. Others are Virgin's Bower, Woolly Dutchman's Pipe and Virginia Creeper.



Photo: Wildflower.org

While American bittersweet is native and non-invasive and would be an excellent alternative, unfortunately, nurseries often mislabel the invasive Oriental bittersweet as American bittersweet. It is very difficult to find true American bittersweet for sale.

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