

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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During the past few summers boating on the Skagit River, I have often noticed the common butterfly bush (Buddleia davidii) growing in lush formation along the river's banks. Its attractiveness is undeniable and because I love watching the birds and butterflies that are drawn to its long purple flowers, I thought nothing of dozens of them growing there. When someone offered me a butterfly bush for my garden, I readily accepted the gift. In fact, I liked its fast growing, attractive qualities so much, that I bought another one. Luckily I bought a hybrid variety because recently I have learned that this pleasing, wildlife magnet is quickly becoming an invasive problem. In fact, this spring the State of Oregon added the butterfly bush to its list of noxious weeds.

Noxious weeds are non-native plants that threaten to crowd out other plants, especially native varieties. Because they left their natural enemies behind when they were transported to another location, these non-native invasives are capable of incredible strength in their invasion of the new environment. "They become botanical thugs the world over", says Mike Maunder, horticultural director of the Miami Botanical Gardens. The butterfly bush in Oregon was added to their noxious weed list because it is capable of crowding out Doug fir seedlings in their reforestation effort. England ranks Buddleia davidii in their Top Twenty noxious weeds. Here in Washington, butterfly bush has been observed not only on wild river banks, but growing out of sidewalk cracks to a height of ten feet. Currently, it is on the Washington state watch list.

All this does not mean that those of us with a butterfly bush in our gardens have to go and tear it out. However, gardeners can do things that will mitigate the damage of the butterfly bush in the future. In any new purchases that gardeners make, the question of whether or not the non-native varieties are invasive can be investigated using the internet. If it is invasive, avoid it. Purchase a native species or a benign non-native substitute. It is important to know that many of our loveliest plants are not native, do not become invasive, and are perfectly safe in the home garden. So it is not necessary to avoid all non-natives. Beware of non-native plants that: produce large amounts of wind-borne seeds; provide berries for wild-life which are then transported outside your garden in bird droppings; are unusually pest and weather resistant (this means they have no natural enemies to act as a control); tend to shade out neighboring plants; or spread quickly by runners. If you have a Buddleia davidii in your garden, like I do, one of the best controls is to deadhead it before the flowers create seeds. At least, in this way, the seeds won't be carried by wind and birds outside your garden. Dispose of unwanted clippings in a plastic bag in the trash.

Keeping invasive plants out of your garden or under your control in your garden does not need to be an onerous task. Simple precautions when caring for your garden and selecting new non-invasive plants as you replace and add to your garden will allow you to have a beautiful garden and keep the natural environment capable of supporting the varied species that live together harmoniously in western Washington.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.