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Green menace; Invasive plant species can damage local ecosystems

By Dan Schneider, DMG Writer

HOUGHTON — Right now they are under at least a foot of white, but eventually, green spring plants will emerge.

While the vast majority of these green spring plants will be a welcome site to residents of the Copper Country, there are a few species that homeowners should be wary of.

They are invasive species that can cause major problems for the local ecosystem.

Among the invasive species currently in the Copper Country are spotted knapweed, Japanese knotweed, purple loosestrife and Norway maple.

Spotted knapweed is found just about everywhere, geographically. In fact, according to Michigan Tech University Associate Professor of Silviculture Linda Nagel, "spotted knapweed is ubiquitous."

Japanese Knotweed grows in areas where water is present. In the summer, it can be seen along U.S. 41 between Houghton and Chassell.

"You can see it growing along the road where there are riparian areas or creeks running into the Portage," Nagel said.

Purple loosestrife is another non-native, invasive plant that thrives in wetland areas.

"Purple-loosestrife might be the most well-established plant that is impacting local ecosystems," Nagel said.

Norway maples came to the area because of their ability to grow well in a city setting.

"Norway maple is a species that is (often) planted as an ornamental in urban areas like Houghton and Hancock," Nagel said.

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It can be difficult to get rid of if it spreads outside the city limits.

“It is a long-lived forest invader,” Nagel said. “It’s hard to get rid of. You can’t just cut it down because it sprouts.”

What makes non-native invasives problematic is their ability to thrive in the environments they invade. They have biological advantages that allow them in many cases to grow better than the native plants in the same environment.

“They spread really quickly, they grow really quickly, and they harm the native species,” Nagel said.

Norway maple, for instance, competes for the same resources as sugar maple. And the reason they are planted in cities is because they are tougher than the native species.

“Norway maples are typically street trees,” said Rachel Tarpey, a forester with the Houghton-Keweenaw Conservation District. “They are a lot more hardy than sugar maples and red maples. They are planted in cities because they can take pollution a lot better, or just dust, or compaction. Their roots can take compaction.”

Even smaller invasive species, like the garlic mustard that is the scourge of the Lower Peninsula and is making its way north, can cause harm to trees in the forest.

“Garlic mustard is very competitive with trees regenerating in a forest,” Nagel said. “It is very competitive and it can overtake the whole understory.”

Garlic mustard is especially damaging to spring wildflower species since it stays green below the snow throughout the winter and gets a jump on the native plants when the snow melts in spring.

By the time native spring flowers sprout, garlic mustard can grow tall enough to block out their light.

Garlic mustard and Pennsylvania Sedge are two invasive species that have not yet had an impact in the Keweenaw, but may soon.

“The Keweenaw Peninsula and the area just south of here is on the edge of a lot of these invaders so it’s kind of a question of whether they’ll get here or not,” Nagel said.

For many invasive plant species — purple loosestrife, garlic mustard — the best way to deal with them is to pull them out by hand.

It is best to pull them before they flower, also, before seeds develop and spread, so spring is the best time to be aware of invasives.

Because hand-pulling is a labor-intensive, it is best not to allow plants to

establish themselves in large populations, in the first place.

It is advisable for homeowners to think about what plant species they plant in their yards and avoid species that could be invasive.

"It's really easy for those invasives to escape into the wild environment so it's best just to plant natives if possible," Tarpey said.

Nagel said wildflower mixes are a common way non-native plant seeds get spread.

"That's something to really be aware of," Nagel said.

The Houghton-Keweenaw Conservation District is a good local resource for property owners concerned about invasive species.

"We can provide advice and technical assistance," Tarpey said.

County Michigan State University Extension offices are another potential resource. A lot of information is also available on the Web.

One starting point is the Michigan Invasive Plant Council,
<http://forestry.msu.edu/mipc>.

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