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Invasive Exotic Plant Species:
Autumn Olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*)

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Autumn olive was introduced to the U.S. from Japan and China in 1830. It was originally planted for wildlife habitat, shelterbelts, and mine reclamation, but has escaped cultivation. It is dispersed most frequently by birds and other wildlife, that eat the berries.

It spreads rapidly in open and disturbed areas. Autumn olive's drought tolerance and ability to fix nitrogen allow it to colonize readily in dry, bare soil.

Figure 1. Autumn olive twig and leaf

Identification

Leaves – The underside of the leaves, along with the fruit and twigs, are silver speckled. Leaves are 1 to 3 inches long by 1 to 1 1/2 inches wide and lanceolate (see Figure 1) in shape.

Fruit – Berry-like silver-speckled red fruit measuring 1/4 to 1/3 inch in diameter.

Figure 2. Autumn olive berries

Twig – Slender and silver speckled. Lateral twigs sometimes resemble thorns.

Form – Grows to a large shrub, up to 20 feet.

Similar species

Russian olive and thorny olive, both of which are also non-native and invasive. Russian olive can be differentiated from autumn olive by yellow olive fruits maturing in the fall. Thorny olive has brown, hairy twigs.

Figure 3. Autumn olive form

Control

Seedlings and sprouts can be hand-pulled when the soil is moist. Care must be taken to remove the entire root system. Otherwise, roots left behind will sprout prolifically.

An herbicide with the active ingredient glyphosate can be used to control larger plants. Foliar application has Proven effective in controlling these species. Glyphosate is nonselective and will affect all green vegetation, so take care to avoid impacting native plant species. At sites where this is a concern, application of the herbicide to the freshly cut stumps of autumn olive shrub should achieve the desired results, while minimizing damage to other plants.

References

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