

## **Invasives Walk and Talk at Holcomb Hill** by Christine St. Georges

Walking the trails at Newtown Forest Association's (NFA) preserves has always been enjoyable as a family activity or to escape into the solitude of the forest. Whether admiring the pattern of bark on a shagbark hickory or stopping to watch a bird gather materials to build her nest, it's always an adventure. But something is amiss in our woodlands and wild places... invasive plants.

Many introduced plants have escaped cultivation and invaded our woodlands. They are outcompeting our native plants like blueberry, viburnum and spicebush. They are killing our native trees, either by shading them out, strangling them or weakening them so they come down in storms. NFA decided to do two things to help mitigate the situation. 1) make it a priority to remove invasives in their preserves and 2) invite representatives from the Connecticut Invasive Plant Working Group (CIPWG) to hold an educational event on identification and removal techniques for invasive species.

CIPWG agreed to come and hold an event on one NFA property. It was decided that Holcombe Hill Preserve was a good location with plenty of invasives. Saturday, May 14th was the chosen day for the event. The invasive focus would be multiflora rose and Japanese barberry but participants soon realized there were more, many more.

Attendees were joined by CIPWG educators, Lisa Brodrie and Dr. Charlotte Pyle, formerly with the USDA NRCS. As the walk and talk began, Dr. Pyle stopped to point out some dandelions growing in the lawn. She commented that these plants, while not native to the U.S., are not considered invasive because they do not take over natural areas containing native plants. This was an important distinction and the crowd chuckled, probably thinking about all the hours spent removing these plants from their non-native American lawns.

As the group proceeded to the border of the woodland, a patch of garlic mustard was observed along the edge of the stone wall dividing the field from the woods. Surprising to learn that this plant was brought here by Europeans generations ago because it was a vegetable that emerged earlier than most other garden plants. Dr. Pyle commented that it is unclear as to why this plant has suddenly decided to become so ubiquitous. This particular plant needs to be bagged and disposed of properly because if simply pulled and left lying on the ground, it can continue to grow and disperse its seeds, even when left on a sunny deck.

Upon entering the trail, the group was immediately surrounded by Asiatic bittersweet, multiflora rose, burning bush, and Japanese barberry. After some identification and discussion, Dr. Pyle directed the group's attention to a huge Norway maple set in the middle of this woodland. This tree leaf's out much earlier than our native maples. Nearby, a much smaller sugar maple had leaves just beginning to open while the Norway maple's leaves were full. Not only do leaves open earlier on the Norway maple but it holds its leaves longer into the fall. This is a competitive advantage over native

trees and is true of many invasives. Milky sap inside a leaf stem is tell-tale sign of a Norway maple. Our native maples have clear sap.

Ms. Brodlie and Dr. Pyle fielded many questions from the group about invasive plants and how to remove them. Then the group set to work, using our loppers, weed wrenches, clippers and brute strength to clear as many invasives as time allotted. While a daunting task, there was celebration when finding spicebush and viburnums still present along the trail, waiting for their moment in the sun. A pleasant reminder that nature is resilient and worth our stewardship.

If you would like to sponsor an event to raise awareness of invasive plants, you can contact [Rose.hiskes@ct.gov](mailto:Rose.hiskes@ct.gov).