

# MOST (UN)WANTED PLANT:



Japanese Barberry  
(*Berberis thunbergii*)



Getty Images

## WANTED: DEAD OR REMOVED

### Guilty of Illegal Ecologic Invasion!

Japanese Barberry is an invasive shrub, native to Asia, that has been planted all over Massachusetts as an ornamental shrub. Birds eat the berries and spread them to nearby open areas and woods, where they proliferate and create **perfect habitat for ticks!**

Barberry has sharp spines that protect mice from predators, and mice are one of the primary vectors for the spread of tick-borne diseases. **Banned for sale in MA since 2009, you may have Barberry seedlings growing on your property without realizing it!**

### If Seen: Dig, Pull, or Cut

Dig out the roots or pull them out with a weed wrench.

OR

Cut all stems to the ground monthly from early spring to fall to deprive the roots of energy. If branches have berries on them, throw them in your household trash rather than composting them.

*Tip: Wear thick gloves to protect your hands and arms from the nasty spines!*



**Common Ground**  
Land Trust INC.

for Leicester & Spencer, MA

For more information, visit our website:

**[CommonGroundLT.org/Invasives](http://CommonGroundLT.org/Invasives)**

# Japanese Barberry Fact Sheet

## *Are you growing this invasive plant?*

It may have been planted on your property as a landscape shrub. Even if you've never planted it, birds spread its berries and it often pops up in woods and fields, far from houses.

Japanese barberry is a spiny shrub 2-8' in height, that blooms in small pale yellow flowers between April and June. Small red berries form in summer, often persisting through the winter after the plant's leaves have dropped. Barberry leaves are alternating, small and oval or spatula-shaped, growing in clusters along the branches. Cultivars introduced for landscape planting have leaf colors ranging from dark purple, yellow, bright green to red.



**Barberry flowers are pale yellow and bloom in spring.** Photo © Arthur Haines, Native Plant Trust

## *Why is it such a bad plant?*

The dense growth habit and tip-rooting stems of Japanese Barberry create a humid microclimate that ticks favor as habitat as they await an animal host. Studies show that areas with significant Japanese barberry infestations have almost 60% more Lyme Disease-carrying ticks than areas where control measures have been taken. Japanese barberry also pushes out native woodland plants, and through its association with earthworms, it alters the ecology of the forest soil, making it inhospitable to tree roots. Deer do not eat barberry due to the spines, and it has no known herbivorous insects in New England to control its spread. Studies have shown that barberry thickets significantly reduce the diversity of insects and arthropods in forests, which has a cascading effect on birds, amphibians and other forest wildlife. Introduced to the US as an ornamental plant in the 1800s, Japanese barberry is still commonly seen in residential and commercial landscape plantings to this day, despite being banned for sale and distribution in Massachusetts as of January 1st, 2009. Self-fertile, a single barberry plant is capable of spreading progeny. In addition to berries, it also reproduces by rooting from the tips of arching branches that reach the ground, forming impenetrable thickets.

## **Chemical-free Japanese Barberry Removal Methods:**

The best time for manual removal is spring, before or during flowering. Japanese Barberry leaves form earlier than other plants so they are easy to identify then. **Wear hand and arm protection against barberry's thorny spines.** Removal of the entire root system is important, as fragments of root left in the ground can resprout. Root systems are fibrous and not usually very large, especially in the shade.

- Starting in spring, cut all stems to the ground and compost them or pile up in an out of the way brush pile to rot. If stems have berries on them, dispose of them in the household trash rather than composting them.
- Dig out the roots with a pointed shovel, or use a weed wrench to pull out the root system. Leave the root ball to dry out until roots are completely dead.
- For established plants with large root systems, cut stems to the ground beginning in spring and, then repeat when resprouts appear. It may take several years, but eventually the root system will become exhausted and the plant will die.
- Forestry professionals use propane flame torches to kill plants without chemicals. See the link on our website [CommonGroundLT.org/Invasives](http://CommonGroundLT.org/Invasives) for details.



**Barberry's thorny spines protect mice that are a primary vector for Lyme disease and other tick-borne diseases.**