

“Knot” A Gardner

By Linda Kulig Magoon

My girlfriend was born with not one, but with two green thumbs. A few years ago, she constructed a garden bed by stacking cinderblocks on one top of the other in the shape of a large rectangle. Cellblock complete, she filled it with pea stone for drainage, compost and manure for fertilizer, and topped it off, like icing on a cake, with potting soil. Seedlings planted, she used the hollow centers of the blocks to grow herbs. Tomatoes, summer squash, and green beans benefited from her watering, fertilizing, weeding, and as rumor has it, though she denies it, her singing. By mid-summer, her garden rewarded her with so much bounty, what she could not possibly eat (or freeze) was placed at the end of her driveway for neighbors to help themselves.

I was inspired. Shortly after moving into my new home, I walked the yard, searching for a suitable location for my raised beds, researching, planning, and dreaming. Seed catalogs piled higher than snowdrifts as I patiently waited for winter to loosen its icy grip.

Fast forward four growing seasons, and I haven't planted a seed. It's not because I work full time, or because I'm never home. Nope, time is not the issue. I spend hours in my yard, more than most homeowners, I'd wager, but not tending to herbs or vegetables. Rather than spend my time growing vegetation, I spend hours killing it.

At the time of my move, I had no idea my property yielded what has to be state champions in size and quantity of three invasive species: Japanese knotweed, oriental bittersweet, and glossy buckthorn.

Invasive plants are as bad as they sound – alien, non-native vegetation that, like your obnoxious uncle who’s had too much to drink at Thanksgiving, are domineering, difficult to get rid of, and, despite your best efforts to make them feel unwelcome, keep coming back. Invasive plants crowd out native vegetation, leading to a monoculture, thereby diminishing food sources for wildlife.

The first alien invader I tackled was Japanese knotweed, also known as Japanese bamboo. It can be found in disturbed, well-drained sites along railroad beds, roadsides, and especially along my driveway. Easily identifiable by its dense, heart-shaped foliage, hollow stalks, and cream-colored flowers, the root of this plant’s ability to proliferate is found in the rhizome – the underground portion of the plant that provides endless opportunities for growth. In the spring, a young person’s fancy may turn to love, but each spring, my fancy turns to pulling up knotweed as it emerges from the ground. In order to keep it under control, once I pull it and as much of the root system as I can, I cover the area with filter fabric to block out sunlight to keep it from growing. Although I’ll never completely eradicate it, I’m proud that when I gaze down my driveway, I no longer see robust stands of bamboo stalks swaying in the breeze.

With the knotweed somewhat under control, this spring I focused on oriental bittersweet. This clingy shrub/vine, once found decorating fireplace mantles with its woody vines and showy orange berries, was used by crafters to make wreaths. Left

unchecked, bittersweet has the ability to spiral around trees and shrubs, eventually girdling and choking them to death. It can also grow numerous branches in every direction and without any pattern, much like the streets of Boston.

I find cutting and destroying bittersweet fulfilling because like a superhero, I enjoy saving my native staghorn sumac, beech, and red maple saplings from certain death. I meticulously cut and unravel the vines from around the trunk and branches. I can almost hear them thank me as I release them from certain asphyxiation. Sometimes I think of myself as the Tree Whisperer.

The final trifecta of invasive species is glossy buckthorn. This small tree/shrub, which has no thorns, can only reproduce from seed. It can be quickly controlled with a few satisfying swipes of a sharpened chain saw. Because bittersweet and Japanese knotweed prefer full sun, I've reached an uneasy truce with glossy buckthorn. Its multi-stemmed trunk keeps areas shaded and the other two pests somewhat at bay.

Gardeners reap the rewards of their efforts with nutritious, delicious vegetables they grew with their hands. I measure success by the vegetation I don't see. Sometimes, I get discouraged by the amount of time I spend working in my yard each spring, year after year, wondering if it's all worth the effort. One day, I'll pursue my goal of actually growing something, but for now, I take satisfaction in what's "knot" there.