



Plant This, Not That: A smart way to avoid invasive plants

Introduction

Many beautiful plants can be found at nurseries and through online catalogs. However, some may harm your local ecosystem or provide little support for pollinators and birds. Certain prohibited plants, including wild-type English ivy (*Hedera helix*) and butterfly bush (*Buddleja davidii*), are easily found online despite being classified as "noxious" invasive species. These plants are banned in Oregon and are considered invasive or a nuisance in many other areas.

Researching potential plant options and their benefits to the local area helps gardeners create gardens that are both beautiful and beneficial.

Identifying Invasive and Nuisance Plants

International trade of ornamental plants plays an important role in the spread of invasive species. An invasive species is an organism that is not native to the local ecosystem and can cause environmental or economic harm. Various systems are used to determine a plant's invasive potential, but classifications differ by state and city because plants that are harmless in one area can cause devastation in another. For instance, purple loosestrife is highly invasive in the wetlands of the Northeast and Northwest but spreads less aggressively in drier regions.

Plants are ranked based on their threat to the environment, ranging from "nuisance" to "noxious" to "extreme danger". For example, a "nuisance" plant might crowd out garden species but cause minimal ecological damage, while an "extreme danger" plant can quickly overrun native habitats and disrupt local wildlife.

Online Plant Shopping – Buyer Beware

Some states ban the shipment of invasive plants, but others have no restrictions or enforcement. Invasive plants can be shipped and established with little oversight. Online nurseries may limit shipping to certain areas, but many states lack regulations to prevent the introduction and spread of invasive species. The sale of English Ivy has been banned in Oregon, yet it is readily available on online sites like eBay, Etsy, and some online nurseries. Even within a state, regulations can be weak. For example, *Prunus laurocerasus*, commonly called Cherry Laurel, can be ordered from a nursery in Oregon, even though it is classified as difficult to control once established. These plants are common and widely available despite their risks.

Refer to your state department of agriculture, state invasive plant councils, weed management districts, or university extension sites for the most current information.

Importance of Using Scientific Names in Identifying Plants

Regional differences in plant common names can cause confusion, but scientific names are recognized worldwide, helping minimize identification errors. For example, the plant commonly called "laurel" can refer to several different species, some of which are invasive. By researching the plant using its full scientific name, including genus and species, such as *Prunus laurocerasus*, you ensure accurate identification and can better determine whether it is harmful in your area.

Plants That Support Pollinators

Flowers have evolved over time to meet the needs of their specific pollinators. A key feature of an effective pollinator plant is stamens—the pollen-producing parts of a flower—that are easy for insects to see and access. Simple, single-flowered plants like cosmos and sunflowers provide good nutrition because pollinators can easily find and collect the pollen. Conversely, flowers with more petals, such as double-flowered roses—often hide the stamens, making it difficult or impossible for bees and other pollinators to access the pollen.



Plant This, Not That

Native plants are the best choice for increasing biodiversity. Below are alternatives to commonly available nursery plants that harm the environment.

Evergreen groundcovers — English ivy (*Hedera helix*), periwinkle (*Vinca minor*), and Winter Creeper (*Euonymus fortunei*) are invasive plants that threaten most forest types in the Pacific Northwest. Some native alternatives include creeping barberry (*Mahonia repens*), sword fern (*Polystichum munitum*), and wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*). Ornamental options include Creeping Raspberry (*Rubus calycinoides*) and Star jasmine (*Trachelospermum asiaticum*).

Privacy hedge – Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*) and English Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) are evergreens used as privacy screens, but they are invasive and hard to control once established. Some native alternatives include Pacific Wax Myrtle (*Myrica californica*), an evergreen that can be sheared; Tall Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*); and California Lilac (*Ceanothus*) – which has various cultivars available. Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) is a California native evergreen with stunning red berries in winter.

Lawns – There are many ways to replace turf lawns with more climate-friendly plants. An Ecolawn is a low-maintenance alternative to a traditional perennial grass lawn. Ecolawns provide a turf-like ground cover and tolerate typical lawn use. Walkable ground covers include sedums, thymes, and Veronica repens. Reducing the lawn area and adding native plants is always an excellent choice.

Resources

Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center, <https://www.wildflower.org>, provides a searchable database of native plants categorized by region.

National Wildlife Federation Native Plant Finder, <https://nativeplantfinder.nwf.org/>, shows which plants support local wildlife.

Garden Smart Oregon: A Guide to Non-Invasive Plants, <https://www.portland.gov/sites/default/files/2022/gardensmart-oregon-guide-to-non-invasive-plants.pdf>

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