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## Recognizing and Managing Invasive Plants: Sweet Autumn Olive

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### Introduction

Sweet autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*) has long been planted by homeowners and land managers as an ornamental shrub, a hedgerow plant, and a provider of food and cover for birds. Unfortunately, over the years, it has become a highly invasive plant in New England and other regions of the United States.

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**What does it look like?**

Sweet autumn olive is quite distinct, particularly when it displays its fragrant flowers in June, or its colorful fruits in August-October. With a little practice, you can learn to recognize it easily even as a young seedling.

Sweet autumn olive is a twiggy shrub that reaches 12-15' in height and width. Its leaves are bright green on top and silver-green below, 1-3 inches long, oval with a blunt or pointed tip, and they alternate along the stem.

Their edges are often slightly wavy. If you look at the leaves with a hand lens, you'll see an unusual texture: the lower leaf surfaces are covered with silvery-white scales. Few plants have this characteristic. The stems are slender and often spiny.

The shrubs reach maturity in as little as three years, at which time they produce 1/2-inch long, funnel-shaped flowers in June; these are pale yellow and highly fragrant. The fruits that develop from the flowers are 1/4" – 1/3" in diameter, slightly longer than broad, and juicy. If you look closely at the fruits, you'll see another unique identifying trait: the fruits are covered with scales that look like gold-silver flecks.

**How and where does sweet autumn olive invade new sites?**

Birds eat sweet autumn olive fruits and distribute the seeds over long distances. Mature plants produce more than 60,000 seeds each and germination rates exceed 50%. The plants fix nitrogen, allowing them to survive in very infertile soils. They also tolerate salt, drought, and very acid soils. These facts, taken all together, explain why sweet autumn olive readily colonizes roadsides, abandoned fields, utility rights-of-way, woodland edges, and disturbed soils in landscapes.

**How can I control sweet autumn olive?**

No single method controls this plant. By combining the following methods, you can manage it:

1. Do not purchase or plant this species. Scout your neighborhood; you might be able to organize a neighborhood management effort of prevention and management. Because birds carry seeds from one site to another, this is not a single-landowner problem; it's a community problem.
2. Learn to recognize the plant as a young seedling (see the photo in this article) and scout your property. Hand-pull young seedlings when they are easily removed from the ground. By removing them before they reach maturity, you can prevent future seed crops. Watch for the seedlings as you weed your garden.
3. Mowing or cutting back to the ground is not effective, as sweet autumn olive readily produces new growth. However, if you are unable to eradicate the plants, you can cut back the stems before the fruits mature in the fall, thereby preventing a new crop of plants.
4. Several herbicides are labeled to control this plant. E-mail [lois.stack@maine.edu](mailto:lois.stack@maine.edu) for specific recommendations.

**If I remove this plant from my landscape, what can I plant in its place?**

Most people who plant sweet autumn olive value it for its rapid growth, fragrant flowers, and fruits that feed birds. Some alternatives that are native to Maine include

- **Dogwoods:** Red osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*), silky dogwood (*Cornum*

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*amomum*) and gray dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*) produce abundant fruits for birds over many weeks. More than 100 birds are reported to eat gray dogweed fruits.

- **Chokeberry:** Black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*) produces beautiful white flowers in May and black fruits that disappear quickly as birds eat them in August. As a bonus, most black chokeberries develop spectacular red/maroon/scarlet/orange fall color.
- **Winterberry:** *Ilex verticillata* is a popular landscape plant, whose red fruits support birds in late fall and early winter.
- **Viburnums:** Maine boasts seven native viburnums. While all are susceptible to viburnum leaf beetles, they are excellent landscape plants where the beetles are not problematic. **Nannyberry** (*Viburnum lentago*) and wild-raisin (*Viburnum nudum* var. *cassinoides*) are widely available at nurseries. [Note: while not native, two other viburnums, Burkwood viburnum (*Viburnum x burkwoodii*) and Koreanspice viburnum (*Viburnum carlesii*) produce very fragrant flowers in spring, and are much less susceptible to viburnum leaf beetles.]

**Where can I find more information?**

Check our fact sheet [Autumn Olive / Russian Olive](#), Bulletin #2525.

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