



BEVERLY SHORES

ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION GROUP
PROMOTING & PROTECTING ECOLOGICAL HARMONY

Privet

Terry Bonace

If you are like me, your first experience with privet was trimming a hedge, under duress. I usually trimmed my grandmother's privet hedge, which must have been almost 8 feet tall. It required standing on a ladder with a pair of hand shears and trying ineffectively to get an even surface on both top and sides. This shrub may be, for that reason, one of the best shrubs for forming something resembling a wall. Luckily such wall-like hedges have fallen out of fashion, for privet has become quite a pest in our woodlands.



Privet Flowers

Along the west side of Broadway just south of the Administration Building, you can see evidence of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore's battle against privet. Three years ago, the privet there was almost completely removed. Now, privet plants are returning where—oh so briefly—there were almost none to be seen. Dan Mason, Botanist with the National Lakeshore told me, "The privet, like bush honeysuckle, burning bush, and others, is another invasive shrub that requires extensive resources for removal from our wetland restoration projects. It spreads quickly, re-sprouts when treated with herbicides and competes with many native species. Beverly Shores' residents would assist the Lakeshore greatly in our restoration efforts by avoiding planting species like privet on their property."

Privet was introduced as an ornamental in the early 1800s, planted widely for its ability to form a rectilinear hedge. The privet found in our area are either border privet (*Ligustrum obtusifolium*) and common privet (*L. vulgare*). Common privet—the most common in Beverly Shores—is an immigrant from the British Isles.



Privet Fruits

Most privet hedges in Beverly Shores have been neglected, filled with vines and weeds, but still producing fruit and seeds. Birds, as usual, are the principal culprit in privet seed dispersion. But they are only doing what comes naturally. Birds would just as soon distribute seeds of native plants if given the chance. Like many other invasives, privet forms a dense understory in forests, and except for feeding birds, provides no food for plant-eating insects. Douglas Tallamy's book, *Bringing Nature*

Home, excoriates privet as well as other invasive plants such as bush honeysuckle, oriental bittersweet, and burning bush, all of which are remarkably pest resistant. None of our native insects or animals have evolved to eat them. As a result, the food these creatures depend on is shoved aside, replaced with what might as well be AstroTurf.

What is so bad about fewer insects? Insects pollinate our plants. They break down dead plant and animal matter. They provide food for other creatures. Invasives break the circle of life.

Recognizing privet, if it has not been maintained in a wall-like hedge (and you don't have it engraved in your mind from childhood chores), is difficult. When small, it resembles burning bush. Privet's leaves grow in pairs, are oval and rounded at the tip, and are only about an inch in length. Privet is more distinctive when clusters of fragrant, white flowers appear at the tips of the leaf stems. These in turn become tiny green berries which turn blue-black in September and October. Privet differs from burning bush in having rounded leaf tips instead of pointed ones, flowers and berries at the tips of the stems instead of at the leaf axils, and no corky wing on the stem.

I don't know of one single plant that can replace a rectangular hedge of privet except perhaps boxwood. But if you think of a hedgerow, like those so commonly seen in the British Isles, and used by much wildlife, a mixture of native shrubs can form a very nice barrier for privacy and for wildlife. Black Haw (*Viburnum prunifolium*), chokeberries, both red and black (*Aronia arbutifolia* and *A. melanocarpa*), fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatica*), winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*), spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) and highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) could all be used.

Mechanical control like cutting and mowing will keep privet from spreading but will not prevent re-sprouting. Small plants can be pulled by hand. Larger shrubs should be cut back and then treated with an herbicide containing glyphosate or triclopyr. These ingredients can be found on the pesticide label. As always, follow label directions carefully if using a pesticide.

Native Alternatives to Privet



Black Haw

*Viburnum
prunifolium*



**Red
Chokeberry**

Aronia arbutifolia



**Fragrant
Sumac**

Rhus aromatica



Spicebush



Elderberry



Winterberry

Beauty for cold days.

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