

Oriental Bittersweet

Celastrus orbiculatus

Staff-tree Family (Celastraceae)

Invasive Plant Information Sheet

Description: Oriental bittersweet is a deciduous woody perennial that grows as a climbing vine or a trailing shrub.

It has glossy, rounded leaves that are alternate with finely toothed margins. The leaves turn yellow in the fall before dropping. The twining vine grows thicker over time with stems reported as thick as four inches in diameter. The female, fruiting plants produce small greenish flower clusters from most leaf axils that mature by September to produce high numbers of fruits and seeds. These fruits are yellow, globular capsules that split open at maturity to reveal three red-orange fleshy arils each containing one or two seeds.

Origin: Native to eastern Asia, including Korea, China and Japan, Oriental bittersweet was introduced to the United States in the 1860's as an ornamental plant. It quickly became established from Louisiana to Maine and has been found in Connecticut since at least 1916.

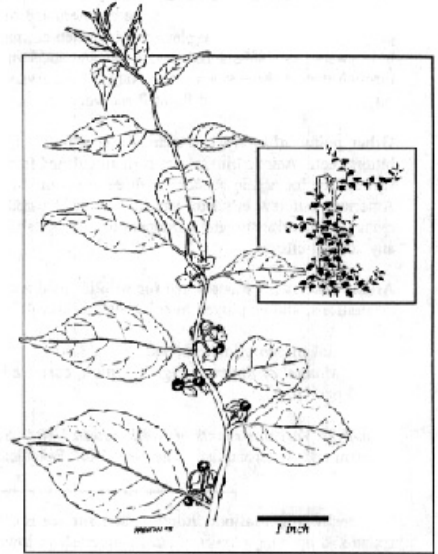
Habitat: Oriental bittersweet spreads easily into forest edges, woodlands, fields, coastal areas, salt marsh edges and any other disturbed site. It can tolerate shade but is often found in more open, sunny areas.

Why is it a problem? This vigorously growing vine shades out other vegetation and climbs trees and power lines where its additional weight can cause damage during high winds, snow and ice. The thick, twining vines can strangle and weaken native trees by girdling the trunk. The abundance of showy fruits has made Oriental bittersweet attractive to birds and small mammals, further

facilitating its spread. This trait also made Oriental bittersweet a formerly popular choice for use in floral arrangements and other holiday decorations. However, due to the invasiveness of this plant, the selling or moving of this species is prohibited in Connecticut and violations are punishable by fines.

Note: Be careful not to confuse the less common native American bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*) with the invasive Oriental bittersweet. American bittersweet produces fruits only in single terminal panicles at the end of the stems, making it difficult for American bittersweet to compete with the seed supply produced by the many axil fruit clusters of Oriental bittersweet. The result is the displacement of our native bittersweet through competition and hybridization.

Management: Hand-pulling small infestations of immature plants can be effective when the entire root is removed and seeds are either not present or bagged



Inset shows a plant climbing an old fencepost. (Illustration by Judy Preston)

and disposed of correctly. For more mature vines, cut the vine close to the ground and immediately treat the lower cut surface with a herbicide labeled for woody plants during the late summer or early fall. Alternatively, vines can be cut repeatedly throughout the growing season for several years.

Alternatives:

Vines

- *Clematis virginiana*
(Virgin's Bower)
- *Lonicera sempervirens*
(Trumpet Honeysuckle)
- *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*
(Virginia Creeper)

Shrub

- *Ilex verticillata* (Winterberry)

References:

Fact Sheet: Oriental Bittersweet. Swearingen, J.M. 2006. Plant Conservation Alliance's Alien Plant Working Group, Washington, DC. 4 pp.

Invasive Plant Fact Sheet/Asiatic Bittersweet. The Nature Conservancy. 2000. The Nature Conservancy, Middletown, CT.