

Japanese Honeysuckle: A Threat to Texas Forests

Ninth of the “Dirty Dozen”

Kim Camilli
Texas Forest Service

Editor’s Note: An introductory article discussing exotic invasive pests that could threaten forest resources in Texas was included in the June 2005 issue of *Texas Forestry*. As a follow-up to that article, a series of 12 short articles about specific exotic pests that are either present in Texas or are at our doorstep is planned. The authors (Joe Pase, Ron Billings, and Kim Camilli) are calling this series the “Dirty Dozen.” Last month, Ron described giant cane reed, the eighth pest in the series. Japanese honeysuckle is the ninth article in the series and the sixth invasive plant to be presented.

Japanese honeysuckle, *Lonicera japonica*, is a beautiful vine with very fragrant white or pale yellow flowers that are visited by hummingbirds. The flowers commonly produce a tiny drop of honey-flavored nectar enjoyed by many children (see photo 1 & 2). It’s hard to believe that this attractive ornamental plant has become a noxious weed responsible for killing numerous shrubs and young trees and overtaking forest lands.

Japanese honeysuckle was introduced into North America in the early 1800’s as an ornamental plant for erosion control, and for wildlife forage and cover. This vine has few natural enemies in North America which allows it to thrive and spread widely and out-compete the native plant species. Japanese honeysuckle is an evergreen to semi-evergreen plant which allows it to grow throughout the entire year unimpeded. This gives it an advantage over native species. This vine can invade fields, forests, wetlands, and all types of disturbed areas. Shrubs and young trees are killed by the vines that twist tightly around the stems and trunks cutting off the flow of water. The scenario sounds like a horror movie.

Spread of this vine is by plant growth (vegetative) and by seed (sexual) production. Japanese honeysuckle also produces long runners that develop into roots when it comes into contact with moist soil. Where light levels are optimal, this vine can grow and spread very rapidly both vertically and horizontally, often forming dense mats. These mats shade out other vegetation and can actually collapse upright stems by the sheer weight of the accumulated vines. Negative effects of this vine include malformed trunks of trees, suppressed plant growth, inhibition of woody and herbaceous plants, and alteration of wildlife habitats.

Management and control of small infestations of this invasive can be performed by careful hand pulling of the vines and roots. In larger infestations effective control of Japanese honeysuckle can be achieved through prescribed burning which greatly reduces the abundant dense mate and large vines. When prescribed burning is not an option, Japanese honeysuckle can be treated with a systemic herbicide such as Glyphosate. Glyphosate is biodegradable so it is highly desirable for chemical control treatments. Since it is a nonselective herbicide, glyphosate will affect all green vegetation in the area, so application should be done in late autumn when other vegetation is dormant. Always read the entire pesticide label carefully before applying to vegetation.

Some suggested alternative plants to substitute for Japanese honeysuckle are false jasmine, trumpet creeper and native wisteria. It is wise to check with a reputable native plant nursery for plants that are appropriate for your specific area and conditions.

Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) records document Japanese honeysuckle from 39 counties, primarily in the central and eastern parts of the state. In response to a recent Texas Forest Service (TFS) questionnaire on invasive plants, managers of natural areas and TFS foresters have recorded Japanese honeysuckle in an additional 35 counties, including most counties in East Texas (see map).

If you find Japanese honeysuckle growing wild in Texas within a county not shown on the map, please report its location to Kim Camilli, TFS plant pathologist in Austin, so that a more comprehensive distribution map of this invasive plant can be documented. Kim can be reached by phone at 512-371-7011 or by e-mail at kcamilli@tfs.tamu.edu. These reports, once verified, will be added to the distribution map on the new invasive web site being developed by TFS and other partners at www.texasinvasives.org.

Photograph 1: Vine of flowering Japanese honeysuckle, by Ron Billings, TFS.



Photograph 2: Close up of Japanese honeysuckle flower, by Kim Camilli, TFS.



Photograph 3: Counties of Japanese honeysuckle locations.

