

Written Testimony in support of HB979/SB915

February 24, 2024

Submitted by Save Our Trees



Save Our Trees, a program of The Anne Arundel County Watershed Stewards (WSA), originated in 2022 to help save our community's tree canopy from the widespread scourge of English ivy and other invasive vines. We have rescued well over 3000 trees and our efforts are broadening as we engage more residents and communities. Invasive plants of all sorts, including invasive vines, are severely damaging Maryland's ecosystems. Shockingly, under current nursery regulations, English ivy remains available for sale in the state.

Marylanders Do Not Expect Nurseries to Sell Invasive Plants.

When Marylanders invest time and money to landscape their properties, they do not expect nurseries to sell them plants that will harm their trees, take over their gardens or reduce bird life in their yards. They assume that the state is controlling the sale of harmful vegetation, so they can choose plants without concern. We recognize that restricting the sale of invasive plants will involve initial financial expenditures; however, the problem is only becoming more widespread and damaging with costs rising the longer we wait.

Our Support

We applaud the scientific, efficient, overdue and comprehensive approach used in HB979/SB915 for removing harmful invasive flora. Since the existing law went into place in 2011, only six invasive plants have been removed from commerce. (The MD Invasive Species Council lists 300 invasive flora species.)

Specific improvements that will increase the number of invasive plants removed from commerce include:

- Establish a streamlined, science-based process for the identification of invasive plants. Time is of the essence. We cannot wait another 13 years for the identification and removal from the nursery trade of an additional six plants. The problem will only become more expensive and more widely destructive if it is not addressed now.
- Move current Tier 2 plants to the list of prohibited plants; the Tier 2 plants are well recognized as invasive.
- Replace the Tier 2 category with a more practical (if properly supported) early warning system.
- Include aquatic plant invaders and plants that are not common in commercial sales, including Internet sales.

The Problem

Invasive plants are significantly diminishing the quality and health of our tree canopy and other ecosystems. In many cases, large mature trees succumb to these vines and take out other trees when they fall. The increasing intensity of storms has exacerbated this problem. Over the last 20 years, the problem has exploded and now affects a large proportion of our county's forests.

Invasive plants often carpet the forest floor. Native understory plants and tree seedlings cannot grow due to the competition from these plants. This situation bodes poorly for the long-term succession of our forests since the canopy is not regenerating. This situation will have cascading effects on our state's ecosystems. Critically, native wildlife, including birds, depend on native plants for their survival.

This dramatic escalation of invasive plant spread is a local, regional, and even worldwide, issue. It affects roadways, parks, and public and private property and diminishes our air and water quality. Ultimately, every Maryland resident's quality of life and welfare will be affected if we lose our native tree canopy and associated ecosystems.

ChesapeakeTrees.net noted that in just five years (2013 – 2018), Anne Arundel County alone has experienced a net loss of 1,815 acres of tree cover on developed land. Each year, the remaining tree cover removes 12.8 million pounds of pollutants (saving \$20 million), reduces storm water by 1.3 billion gallons (saving \$11.2 million) and sequesters 206,000

tons of carbon (saving \$38.6 million). Tree conservation is not simply an aesthetic, cultural and habitat issue; it is also an economic one.

The Science Behind the Problem

- Invasive plants outcompete our native flora.
- Many invasive plants leaf out in spring before our natives, vying for sunlight, water and nutrients.
- Deer generally favor native plants over non-natives, accelerating the growth of invasives.
- Invasive vines trap moisture against tree trunks and create ideal conditions for disease, fungus and harmful insects, ultimately harming or killing the trees.
- Most of our beneficial insect larvae cannot eat non-native plants. These larvae are crucial, life-sustaining nutrition for baby birds. One chickadee nest requires 6,000 to 10,000 caterpillars for the baby birds to fledge.
www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/meet-ecologist-who-wants-unleash-wild-backyard-180974372/
- The North American bird population has declined by nearly 30% since the 1970s. Invasive plants rob our native wildlife (including pollinators) of food and shelter.
www.scientificamerican.com/article/silent-skies-billions-of-north-american-birds-have-vanished/
- Worldwide, invasive plants are a major cause of biodiversity loss. In Maryland, our ecosystems are significantly altered, threatening human welfare. About 42% of American species on the “Threatened or Endangered” species lists are at risk, primarily due to alien invasive species.¹
- Locally and regionally, our forests are not regenerating due to invasive flora, climate change, overpopulation of deer, invasive insects and diseases. dcist.com/story/23/12/20/dc-local-forests-failing-tree-regeneration/
- Unregulated, invasive plant nursery sales contribute significantly to the invasive flora issue
www.umass.edu/natural-sciences/news/plant-nurseries-invasive-species

The Economic Cost of the Problem (MD Invasives Species Council 12/2023)

- Invasive species cost Americans an estimated \$137 billion annually in 2000² (approximately \$239 billion in today’s dollars).
- Control of invasive plants requires incalculable labor hours for property owners, local government employees and hundreds of trained volunteers across the county.
- No cost estimate on biodiversity loss is truly possible; biodiversity is priceless, vital and surely underestimated.

The Human Scope of the Problem

- Mature trees provide benefits that reduce societal healthcare costs: Air cleansing, water purification, temperature cooling, wind reduction and anxiety moderation.
- Management of invasive plants frequently requires the use of costly and harmful pesticides that contaminate our drinking water, watersheds and ecosystems while exposing humans, pets and wildlife to dangerous toxic substances.
- Street trees reduce the heat island effect significantly.
- Neighborhoods with trees have a lower incidence of crime.
- Property values rise with the presence of mature healthy trees.
- Energy costs and usage decline with well-located trees.

Sources:

1. David Pimental, L. Lach, R. Zuniga, D. Morrison, Environmental and Economic Costs of Nonindigenous Species in the United States, *BioScience*, v. 50, Issue 1, Jan. 2000, pp 53–65.
2. Ibid, p. 53