

INVASION ALERT!

Burning Bush

Groton has been invaded by a foreign plant: Burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*). This hardy, highly-fertile shrub forms dense thickets in forests and sunny areas alike. Burning bush is self-fertile and spreads through prolific dispersal of berries via birds and other wildlife. It out-competes native plants by growing leaves early in the season and keeping them longer than other plants in the fall.

The purpose of this flyer is to show you what it is, how to identify it, and what you can do about it.



Burning bush in fall color

Description

Burning bush, also known as winged euonymus, is a deciduous shrub ranging from 5' to 20' in height with multiple stems and angular branches. The finely serrated leaves are generally ½" wide, with pointed tips.

The growth habit of young plants is upright, becoming more rounded with age. Young stems are green with distinctive vertical ridges, or "wings", of various sizes.

While growth above ground can appear slow, the roots of burning bush spread quickly and extensively underground. Flowers are small, greenish, and unremarkable, occurring in late spring. The small red berries are produced abundantly in fall, emerging from reddish capsules, which can persist into the winter.



Closeup of leaves and flowers



Closeup of berries

The plant itself is not grazed by native herbivores, but the berries are spread over great distances by birds and other animals. Beneath a mature shrub, a "seed shadow" of many young plants can often be found.

Burning bush was introduced from northeastern Asia in the 1860s as an ornamental plant. It invades forests throughout the Eastern US, and is now banned for sale in Massachusetts. It is tolerant of both sun and shade, making it a threat to both open areas, such as roadsides, and undisturbed forest alike.

Identification



Burning bush is still frequently seen in beds and plantings across Massachusetts, and is now found in forests and wild areas.

- New growth features green stems. Brown “wings” (distinctive vertical ridges) appear as the stem matures. The stems then turn woody.
- Leaves are deciduous, dark green, and found in pairs along stems.
- Fall foliage is vibrant purplish-red.

Burning bush may be confused with other species of euonymus including our native strawberry bush (*Euonymus americana*), also called “bursting heart”, which has green non-winged stems.

Saplings of native sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) with winged stems may be mistaken for winged burning bush. (Source: nps.gov)



L: Strawberry bush; R: Sweetgum



Fall foliage



“Escaped” burning bush in a forest.

Source: ecolandscaping.org

What You Can Do

Removing burning bush can be somewhat of a chore but requires no special training or equipment.

- Small plants can easily be pulled from the ground and the roots left to dry out. Immediate composting is not recommended.
- Fall is a good time to remove burning bush, as the foliage is easily identifiable.
- The best time for manual removal is before the berries start dropping.
- Repeated cutting or mowing is also effective, if done before fruiting.
- Try to remove the entire root system, as burning bush can re-sprout from fragments left in the ground.
- Larger specimens can be dug from the ground using a hoe, shovel, or Weed Wrench®.
- Larger stumps may be successfully treated with herbicide, but that's beyond the scope of this flyer. Please be safe and responsible when working with herbicides.

Some attractive native Massachusetts replacements for your garden are spice bush (*Lindera benzoin*), chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*), highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), and bursting-heart or “strawberry bush” (*Euonymus americanus*), which is actually a non-invasive species of burning bush native to America.

The Invasive Species Committee may be able to provide some guidance, possibly help, and would like to know about large Burning Bush infestations in town. To contact the committee, send email to:

invasive@grotonma.gov

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