Invasive honeysuckle (Lonicera spp.)

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In April we see huge patches of green as shrubs begin leafing out, this is a welcome sight after a long winter. However, there is something much more sinister about these shrubs. Invasive bush honeysuckle (Lonicera spp.) “leaf out early in the year, allowing them to shade out native plants. Honeysuckles encourage birds to nest earlier in the year and lower to the ground, making them more vulnerable to predation and the fruit that invasive honeysuckles produce are eaten by birds, but they do not supply nutrition that native fruit-bearing shrubs provide” (Western NY Prism).

“The invasive bush honeysuckles are deciduous shrubs that may grow to be 15 ft. tall. Honeysuckle leaves are opposite, have smooth margins, and can vary in shape, being oval or tapered at the tip. In May and June, honeysuckles produce many small white, pink, or red flowers. From July through September, honeysuckles produce red or yellow fruit, which are often situated in pairs near the base of the leaves. The bark on the larger stems is shaggy.

Invasive honeysuckles have hollow stems, distinguishing them from the native honeysuckle species." (Western NY Prism) Lonicera japonica is a vine and can climb to 40'.

Lonicera tatarica and L. morrowii were introduced to the U.S. as ornamental shrubs sometime in the mid-1700s and mid-1800s. Lonicera maackii was first introduced into the U.S. in 1897/98 and from approximately 1960 – 1980 was used extensively for erosion control.

One of the reasons that invasive bush honeysuckle has increased exponentially is that it thrives just about anywhere. Although it will grow best in full sun some species (Lonicera tatarica and L. maackii) will tolerate semi shade and will quickly take over huge areas. Lonicera japonica is shade tolerant. Lonicera spp. spread by root suckering and seed dispersal by birds and some mammals.

As well as displacing native plants research by the Weed Science Society of America suggests that Lonicera maackii is a food resource for deer in early spring and that deer also like to bed in it because the patches are dense. Tick expert Brian F. Allan PhD and his colleagues report a higher incidence of deer and bacteria infected ticks in these dense patches. *L. maackii* releases chemicals that reduce seed germination and plant growth. This is known as plant allelopathy and can seriously the native plants in our woodlands.

As you drive around Columbia and Greene counties you will see bush honeysuckle growing by the side of the road, in gardens, parks and areas of woodland that have been colonized by this invasive shrub.

Lonicera maackii, L. tatarica, L.x bella, L. morrowii and L. japonica are all on the NYS invasive species prohibited list. There are simply not enough boots on the ground to deal with the number

of invasive species in our area but if we all removed invasive Lonicera spp. from our property we could make a difference. When you remove invasive bush honeysuckle shrubs try and replace them with native shrubs. These include spicebush, inkberry, shrub dogwoods, red chokecherry, winterberry, serviceberry, and viburnums.

New seedlings pull out quite easily, but older shrubs are more of a challenge. If you do not remove the roots the shrub will re-sprout and will need to be cut multiple times. Herbicides can also be used but for large areas this is not practical. There are apps that you can use for identification and reporting invasive species. iNaturalist is an app that can help with identification and imapinvasives is a reporting app and a tool that helps track invasive species. Glenda Berman Master Gardener Volunteer Cornell Cooperative extension of Columbia and Greene Counties, April 2020