Problem Plants of Northeast Iowa

Watch out for these plants as you explore Northeast Iowa. Some can leave you with rashes or burns. Others are *invasive species*, plants that were brought here from other countries or continents. Now, they compete with plants native to Iowa for light, nutrients, water, and space, making it harder for the native species to survive.

Garlic Mustard

- Look for: heart shaped leaves with teeth on edges; small white flowers with four petals shaped like a cross
- Leaves smell like garlic when crushed
- Found in moist, shaded areas during spring and fall
- Competes with native spring wildflowers

Common Buckthorn

- Look for: shrub or small tree; opposite, broad, oval leaves with fine teeth on edges and pointed tips; dense clusters of 2–6 yellow-green flowers with 4 petals; small black berries
- Found in light, shaded woods
- Shades out native shrubs and trees

Bush Honeysuckle

- Look for: large bush; blue-green, opposite leaves with smooth edges; tube-shaped, white, pink, or red flowers that come in pairs; yellow-orange to red berries
- Found along forest edges, abandoned fields, pastures, and other open habitats
- Forms dense shrub layer that crowds and shades out native plant species

Canada Thistle

- Look for: prickly, alternate leaves with teeth on edges; hairy stems; light purple, umbrella-shaped flowers in clusters
- Found in disturbed prairies, savannas, and fields
- Crowds out and replaces native plants

Stinging Nettles

- Look for: Plant: opposite, oval, dark green leaves with coarse edges and covered with tiny, stiff hairs; tiny, light green flowers hanging in clusters where leaves attach to stem
- Found in woodlands, thickets, and along water
- Covered with tiny hairs that pierce skin and inject chemicals causing an intense, stinging pain
- Also called burning weed, itch weed, and fire weed

Poison Ivy

- Look for: woody vine that climbs trees or creeps along ground; may form into shrub
- Leaves are
  - compound with 3 leaflets
  - leaves (not leaflets) alternate along stem
  - new leaves bright red and shiny
  - turn yellow, orange, or red in fall
  - may be notched, lobed, or smooth
  - lower leaves have short stalks; middle leaf has longer stalk
- Found along field, road, or forest edges or in disturbed areas
- Entire plant contains an oil that causes an itchy skin rash that lasts several weeks

Wild Parsnip

- Look for: alternate, branched, compound leaves with 5–15 opposite, egg-shaped leaflets with teeth on edges and deep lobes; hundreds of tiny yellow flowers in flat, umbrella shaped clusters
- Found along road or field edges, in prairies, or in other open, sunny areas
- Juices of plant contain chemicals that react in sunlight to burn skin
- Invades disturbed prairies and savannas and competes with native species

Crown Vetch

- Look for: creeping plant that forms dense mounds of vegetation; dark green, pinnately compound leaves; pea-like, crown-shaped pink flowers clustered at end of stalks
- Invades native grassland prairies and dunes; shades out native plants and climbs over small trees and shrubs
- Brought to U.S. for erosion control in the 1950s