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

- Plant: 1st year: clump of leaves close to ground; 2nd year: 2–3.5 feet tall with flowers and seed stalks
- Leaves: triangular or heart shaped; coarse teeth on margin
- Flowers: clusters of small, white flowers with 4 petals in the shape of a cross
- Leaves smell like garlic when crushed
- Found in moist, shaded areas during spring and fall
- Competes with native spring wildflowers like hepatica, Dutchman's breeches, and trilliums

Bush Honeysuckle

- Plant: multi-stemmed; erect; 5–12 feet tall
- Leaves: bluish-green; opposite; smooth edges; 1–2.5 inches; egg shape
- Stems: older stems hollow
- Flowers: tubular; white, pink, or red; paired in leaf axils
- Berries: yellow-orange to red; lots of seeds
- Bark: light gray; may peel in vertical strips
- Found along forest edges, abandoned fields, pastures, and other open habitats
- Forms dense shrub layer that decreases light availability and depletes soil moisture and nutrients; crowds and shades out native plant species

Common Buckthorn

- Plant: shrub or small tree up to 22 feet high
- Leaves: opposite, broad, oval; rounded or pointed at tip; finely jagged edges; dark glossy green
- Stems: sharply pointed
- Flowers: dense clusters of 2–6 yellow-green flowers with 4 petals; in leaf axils
- Berries: small (1/4 in.), black
- Bark: gray to brown; rough textured like plum trees
- Wood: yellow sapwood, pinkish orange heartwood
- Found in light, shaded woods
- Shades out native shrubs and trees

Canada Thistle

- Plant: erect stems; 1.5–4 feet tall
- Leaves: prickly; lance shaped; spiny, toothed margins; alternate
- Stems: branched; slightly hairy; ridged
- Flowers: rose, purple, or lavender; rounded, umbrella-shaped clusters
- Found in disturbed prairies, savannas, fields, meadows, and other non-forested areas
- Crowds out and replaces native plants

Stinging Nettles

- Plant: 2–4 feet tall
- Leaves: opposite, oval, dark green, 2–6 inches long; strongly serrated margins and tapered ends; covered with tiny, stiff hairs
- Flowers: Tiny, greenish or yellowish; hang in clusters above where leaves attach to stem on female plants
- Found in disturbed places with rich soil, like woodlands, thickets, and along water
- Covered with tiny, almost invisible hairs that pierce skin and inject chemicals causing an intense, stinging pain followed by red, irritated skin
- Also called burning weed, itch weed, and fire weed
- Edible and nutritious if cooked to remove stinging compounds

Poison Ivy

- Plant: woody vine that climbs trees or creeps along ground; may form into shrub
- Leaves:
  - 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
- Flowers: green-yellow; inconspicuous
- Berries: tiny, greenish-white, pumpkin-shaped
- 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

- Plant: 1st year: rosette of leaves close to ground; 2nd year: single flower stalk and branching leaves
- Leaves: alternate; branched; compound
  - Leaflets: 5–15 opposite egg-shaped leaflets; toothed edges and deep lobes; upper leaflets smaller than lower
- Flowers: hundreds of tiny yellow flowers in flat-topped umbel 2–6 inches wide
- 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

- Plant: creeping stems that reach 2–6 feet in length; forms dense mounds of vegetation; grows to 1.5–2 feet tall
- Leaves: dark green, pinnately compound, with 15–25 leaflets
- Seed pods: narrow, segmented, pointed, and 2–3 inches long
- Flowers: pea like; pink-white to dark pink; clustered at end of stalk
- Invades native grassland prairies and dunes; shades out native plants and climbs over small trees and shrubs
- Produces lots of seeds and also spreads by underground rhizomes
- Adds nitrogen to the soil, which can affect native plant communities
- Brought to U.S. for erosion control in the 1950s