

# What is Bush Honeysuckle? Why should we remove them?

Amur honeysuckle (*Lonicera maackii*), colloquially referred to as "bush honeysuckle" (two additional nonnative, invasive bush honeysuckles occur in the eastern U.S.), was introduced into the U.S. as an ornamental for city landscapes in 1897. The plant was promoted for soil stabilization and reclamation programs in the 1960's. Since introducing bush honeysuckle to our gardens and landscapes, it has "escaped" and spread rapidly across the eastern U.S. infesting forests and other habitats. The plant's invasiveness is due to a rapid growth rate relative to native plants, and the ability to tolerate moderate shade and outcompete neighboring plants for available sunlight. Recent work by researchers in Ohio has shown that bush honeysuckle can also outcompete neighboring plants for water thanks to its fine root system, the majority of which is located within the top 5 inches of soil. The major ecological issues stem from the fact that bush honeysuckle displaces native annuals and perennial herbs negatively affecting floral diversity. Additionally, the foliage of bush honeysuckle is not edible to the vast majority of our native caterpillars, which happen to be the chief staple of growing songbird chicks. The loss of native plant diversity disrupts local food webs comprising the health of ecosystems. Native plants feed ecosystems; nonnative do not.



## How do I identify them?

This deciduous shrub grows upright and can reach heights over 20 feet. The stems and branches are hollow, a characteristic that can help distinguish bush honeysuckle from most native shrubs which have solid stems. Leaves are attached opposite to each other along the branch and can grow up to 3.5 inches long and 1.5 inches wide. Each leaf tapers to an elongated tip. The upper leaf surface is usually dark green and has no to few hairs; the lower leaf surface is a lighter green and has hairs along the leaf veins.



Bush honeysuckle produces white flowers from May into June. These flowers are fragrant and turn to a creamy yellow color as they age. Bush honeysuckle flowers occur in pairs at the junction of the stem where the leaves branch out. Flowers are approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 inch long and have 2 lips. The five petals of each flower are fused together to form the honeysuckle tube.



Over summer, fertilized flowers transform into green berries approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch in diameter. In fall, these ripen into bright red berries that each contain multiple seeds. Birds and white-tailed deer eat the berries and spread the seeds to new areas. In mid to late fall, the plant's leaves will turn yellow and then drop off. During late fall and winter it's clump of stems with thin, papery strips of tan bark that aids most in identification.



## How do I remove them?

So, you have a patch (or ocean) of bush honeysuckle; where do you start? We don't want the infestation to spread, so a priority should be to target the mature, flower/fruit-producing shrubs. Once those are removed, you will have given yourself a little time before new seeds will be produced in the area. You can use a handsaw, loppers (for mature shrubs with stems <3 in in diameter), or chainsaw to cut bush honeysuckle. I prefer to use loppers to cut the shrub back and then follow up with a handsaw or chainsaw on the main trunks (see more on Page 2). Here comes the decision-making in this process. Killing these mature bush honeysuckle can be completed with or without herbicide. If you choose to use herbicide you will **immediately** apply it to the cut stumps. Two of the most effective chemical options for bush honeysuckle control are triclopyr (Remedy Ultra, Pasture Guard) and glyphosate (Roundup, Touchdown). It is important to note that glyphosate is a non-selective herbicide and will kill or injure non-target plants, therefore we recommend using an applicator that does not spray (avoid drift). For a cut-stump application, apply a 20 percent glyphosate solution with an applicator or brush, thoroughly coating the freshly cut stump. Always check the herbicide label for instructions and confirmation of herbicide use rates. If a mature shrub is only cut and not treated with herbicide, it will re-sprout stems ("suckers") that as soon as 2 years after growing can begin producing flowers/fruits. Following up with a handsaw/loppers the following growing seasons is critical to eliminate mature plants.

While removing mature bush honeysuckle, you will encounter younger individuals. Hand pulling young plants can be effective in preventing or minimizing infestations. The key here is to remove as much of the root system as possible while leaving behind as much soil as possible. While most people agree that digging them out by their roots is the best form of removal, that is not always the case. Digging up large bush honeysuckle plants in natural areas causes extensive soil disturbance, which can damage non-target plants, increase erosion, and create optimal conditions for recolonization by bush honeysuckle and other invasive plants.

For plants with stems 2 inches or larger, begin cutting the branches at shoulder height. You may need to cut these “tip” branches smaller for easy handling or removal. Next, cut the lower “trunks” at ground level and remove the stems. They will sprout again next spring, but will be easily cut back with hand pruners. If you continually remove the regrowth, they will eventually die. This method works when you are removing just a few shrubs. To avoid sprouting altogether, either dig out the stumps by hand or remove with a stump grinder.

If you prefer using herbicides, spray the fresh-cut stumps immediately within 60 seconds following initial cutting with a 10% concentration of glyphosate (Roundup or similar) or an 8% concentration of triclopyr (Brush-Be-Gone or similar). The best time to do this is in fall. Next best time is in winter when temperatures are above freezing.

### **Plan to replant with native vegetation**

Winter to early spring is the best time to replant.

Replacing a honeysuckle “screen” involves selecting the right species, using a larger-size plant, planting in good soil, leaf mulching, and ensuring it has plenty of water. The best native shrubs for screening in part shade or at the edge of the woods include rough-leaved dogwood (*Cornus drummondii*), American hazelnut (*Corylus americana*), American bladdernut (*Staphylea trifolia*), and blackhaw viburnum (*Viburnum prunifolium*). Keep in mind that few plants grow as densely as bush honeysuckle in heavy shade, so light thinning of lower branches on canopy trees can provide more sunlight to shrubs and improve density. Trim canopy trees before installing replacement shrubs. Select the biggest plants you can afford, but keep in mind that small seedlings/saplings grow surprisingly fast in good soil.

Go slowly with honeysuckle removal. Remove and replace bush honeysuckle a couple at a time, if that suits you, and in a few years you will begin to see results in the most delightful way.

