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FEATURED

## Group working with neighborhoods to help native plants, wildlife

By Carol Kugler The Herald-Times

Feb 12, 2020



Asian bush honeysuckle, shown here with berries, is the invasive plant that Monroe County Identify and Reduce Invasive Species has listed as the 2020 invasive plant of the year, with hopes of people working on controlling and eradicating it from Monroe County properties. (Courtesy photo)

What began with one yard has grown to whole neighborhoods and city parks.

Volunteers with Monroe County Identify and Reduce Invasive Species, also known as MC-IRIS, are working with neighborhood associations in Monroe County to do surveys of where invasive plants are located and then working to eradicate as many of them as possible. They are also

building tool kits people can borrow and setting up workshops.

The efforts began almost four years ago when MC-IRIS volunteers who were knowledgeable about identifying invasive plants began free surveys of people's land. That led to mapping where invasive species were located, with that information shared with other agencies including The Nature Conservancy, Purdue University, Indiana Invasive Species Council and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

Ellen Jacquart, chair of MC-IRIS, conducted many of the land surveys and wondered if it would be possible to engage whole neighborhoods in the effort to eliminate as many invasive plants as possible.

"Ellen came to our neighborhood, and I found there were more people interested than I thought," said Gillian Field, community organizer with MC-IRIS who lives on the east side of Bloomington.

Field and Jacquart realized that neighborhoods were an untapped resource for helping not only reduce the number of invasive plants but also increase the number of native plants that wildlife, including monarch butterflies, other pollinating insects and birds, need to survive and thrive.

"Neighborhoods are overlooked as a potential for projects," Field said, adding that urban areas can provide native plants a home and become a corridor for wildlife. The urban areas also provide food — insects, birds, small mammals — for other wildlife.

That is becoming more essential as the seeds planted in most agricultural farm fields have neonicotinoid pesticides on them. Neonicotinoids are toxic not only to weeds but kill honeybees, other insects and can be toxic to other animals who eat the infected insects or the agricultural plants or seeds. The pesticides are very mobile, moving easily in the soil and within water, and are stable, with the toxic chemicals lasting for years.

"Unfortunately, (neonicotinoids) don't discriminate," Jacquart said. "They get taken up by other plants nearby. ... Neighborhoods don't have farm fields near them."

Field discovered her neighborhood had people eager to learn how to identify invasive plants, work to eradicate them and plant natives in their place. That led Field to set up work days and events, which were well received. Then Field, Jacquart and other MC-IRIS volunteers began to

offer similar events in other neighborhoods.

“It’s the people in that neighborhood getting together,” Field said, adding that participants know there are concerns for damage to the environment and are willing to help on their land.

The response has been overwhelming, Jacquart said. “This is where you can make a difference in your neighborhood and your yard,” she said, and many people are willing to do their part.

As a way to increase the reach of the neighborhood projects, Field helped secure small and simple grants through the Bloomington Housing and Neighborhood Development Department that can provide up to \$500 for an approved project. Neighborhood associations have an essential part of the process, Field said.

Doris Sims, director of HAND, was the person who suggested that MC-IRIS conduct its Invasive Plant Awareness Days in city parks, Field said. So from 1 to 4 p.m. the first Saturday of each month, March through November, people can learn to identify and control invasive plants at various parks. The first session will be March 7 at Griffy Lake Nature Preserve to control woody invasives and garlic mustard. Participants will learn to identify and control the targeted plant species. Anyone interested should register online at <https://bloomington.in.gov/parks/volunteer>.

This past year, similar “weed wrangles” have had 10 to 50 people participating while learning about plant identification of invasive and native plants as well as historical facts about the parks or places where they’re working. That will continue with the awareness days this year.

While MC-IRIS hopes to control all species of invasive plants, 2020 efforts will focus on Asian bush honeysuckle, which can be found throughout the county. The goal is to pick a specific plant to try and control each year. Asian bush honeysuckle was picked because it is so prolific and found in so many areas and also because it’s easy to identify.

Some people like the honeysuckle in their yard because its blossoms smell sweet — but Jacquart counters with the fact that studies have shown bush honeysuckle helps increase tick populations and decrease songbird numbers. The dense bushes provide habitat for many animals that serve as hosts for ticks, she explained. Birds need 75% of the local plant base to be native to produce enough insect larvae to feed their offspring, and since Asian bush honeysuckle leafs out earlier than most native plants, it keeps them from growing. Also the honeysuckle fruit doesn’t have enough of the proteins and lipids birds need.

A grant that MC-IRIS partnered on with Indiana University — Prepared for Environmental Change for \$21,308 will provide some other workshops and tool kits for people in Monroe County. The grant will help with 10 Take Control workshops. Each will be three hours and give landowners information and skills needed to identify and control invasive plants. The first two will be in partnership with Ivy Tech Lifelong Learning. Registration is through the college. The classes will be 1-4 p.m. March 21 at Karst Farm Park and noon-3 p.m. March 27 at Indiana Center for Life Sciences.

As a Valentine's Day gift to county residents, MC-IRIS is putting together eight tool kits that can be loaned out so people have the proper equipment, with some instruction, to control invasive plants on their property. The kits also have instructions on how to safely use herbicides to kill invasive plants.

"People can make a difference in the city," Field said. "We do have a lot of diversity in our forests" and it needs to be protected. She believes increasing native plants, shrubs and trees in neighborhoods will benefit wildlife and forests for years to come.

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## Upcoming events

### MC-IRIS events

Take Control workshops are three hours. The first two are in partnership with Ivy Tech Lifelong Learning. They will be:

- 1-4 p.m. March 21 at Karst Farm Park, 2450 S. Endwright Road, Bloomington. Register: <https://bit.ly/2UGwQKa> (case sensitive).
- Noon to 3 p.m. March 27 at Indiana Center for Life Sciences at Ivy Tech, 501 Profile Parkway, Bloomington. Register: <https://bit.ly/2uGo0BJ> (case sensitive).

The Reduce One Invasive Species Challenge for 2020 is to control Asian bush honeysuckle. For more, go online to [MC-IRIS.org/reduce-one-invasive-species-challenge.html](https://mc-iris.org/reduce-one-invasive-species-challenge.html)

There will be 8 tool kits that will be available for loaning to Monroe County landowners. The program is expected to be up and running by Feb. 14. For more, go to [MC-IRIS.org/tool-kits-for-loan.html](https://mc-iris.org/tool-kits-for-loan.html).

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