

Invasive Plant Removal Program

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

Would you like to get a great workout and help rehabilitate parklands? Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) is in its second pilot year of the Invasive Management Area (IMA) program and we are lucky to have an active site at Royal Lake. Here's how the IMA program works: an area within a county park is identified as overrun with invasive plants (aggressive, non-native plants such as [Japanese barberry](#), winged burning bush, autumn olive, and more). A volunteer site leader applies for and is granted a permit to remove the target plants. FCPA provides the tools, bags, and gloves for the site leader to conduct several workdays dedicated to target plant removal. Removal is completed by hand; volunteers don't apply herbicides or operate power tools. Once the area is adequately cleared of invasives, FCPA provides native plants for habitat rehabilitation during an autumn planting. The site is continuously monitored, even after replanting, since some invasives may try reemerging from a dense seed bank or roots left in the soil.

The primary target at Royal Lake (specifically [Shanes Creek](#)) is [English ivy](#). [Japanese stiltgrass](#), [garlic mustard](#), and [mile-a-minute](#) are also on the site, but English ivy is so persistent that some states have outlawed its sale. Besides its aggressive growth and lack of natural predators, it kills plants—from trees to groundcover—through smothering and blocking light. So far, IMA volunteers have cut ivy-free “windows” around all of the Shanes Creek tree trunk bases, giving the trees a chance to capture all the light they'll need to stay healthy. Since the ivy protects the ground from erosion, we left ivy near streams and spillways, until we can establish native plants in this area. However, volunteers also started clearing ground level ivy away from waterways. In the process, various native plants including ferns, tiny partridge berry, and Indian pipes were discovered!

As people learn of the IMA program's importance, more volunteers are joining; we've had participants come as far as Manassas (Prince William County lacks a similar program). Fairfax has many other IMA sites countywide, all of which need volunteer support. For more information on these sites, the IMA program, or target plants, please visit <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/resources/ima/> or contact me at greg@grsykes.com.

Even if you can't join us for a few hours, the backyard is a great place to start replacing invasives with natives or well-behaved non-natives! The recent vandalism and arson brought attention to some of the misuse of Royal Lake's parkland, including the illegal dumping. We've picked up bottles/trash, yard debris, pressure-treated wood, and even a car battery! You can help the woodlands by properly disposing of all litter. If you find garbage lying on the street, park, etc., carry it to an appropriate trashcan or recycle bin. Yard debris may seem harmless, but it both adds excessive nutrients to waterways and suffocates seedlings and low-growing plants. A great way to help the forests and your gardens is to mulch yard debris in a compost pile on your property. As I remind the volunteers, it's not the “thanks” you hear from me or the county that is as important as the unheard gratitude you receive from the wildlife and from future generations who will enjoy Virginia's native beauty.

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