

## Return of the Invasive Plant Q/As

By Greg Sykes ([greg@grsykes.com](mailto:greg@grsykes.com))

Thank you for so much interest in habitat restoration:

Q: Plants are boring. I'm more into animals. Why should I sign up to be an IMA volunteer?

A: The IMA program is more than pulling weeds and sinking native plants for the plants' sake. IMA helps restore wildlife habitat to a more favorable state. Many native plants are natural birdfeeders. In addition to fruits and seeds, plants attract insects upon which birds, mammals, and reptiles feed. Additionally, these plants provide shelter, from a single curled leaf to a hollow dead tree. The other great aspect to IMA is you often find different types of tracks, nests, dens, or the animals themselves.

Then there is the chain effect—personally, my strong interest is sea life and I have published several papers on coral propagation. In addition to the local wildlife benefits, I view IMA and replanting native species as a means to prevent erosion, improve water quality, help the Chesapeake Bay, and inevitably support ocean life. Royal Lake is a small site in the Chesapeake watershed, but as everyone works to improve their immediate area whichever way they can (reduce lawn chemical, agricultural, and livestock runoff; lower point source pollutants; etc.), we will all contribute to a healthier environment.

Q: Will this IMA site be back to a mature forest in a couple of years?

A: The IMA program is a legacy project. Complete invasive species eradication might take a few years, but tree maturation takes decades, and rich, natural topsoil takes centuries to form. However, someone must start reversing the ecological downward spiral brought by invasive, non-native plants and IMA volunteers are the first ones hitting the ground! Every year that stewards tend an IMA site, the park looks better to humans and healthier, more inviting to wildlife.

Q: I like the IMA program, but am physically unable to enlist on a workday. Can I do anything else to assist?

A: Yes! First, you can reevaluate your yard and remove any invasives you have. Many of the plants battled in parks are garden escapees, either through seed dispersal or through climbing over/under the fence. If ailments prevent you from outdoor work, hire someone to pull those weeds. If you hire a knowledgeable nursery to help, they may provide excellent native replacements.\* You'd be surprised how many nursery staff members also dislike invasive plants yet sell them due to consumer demand.

Another way to help the IMA program is recruiting volunteers for a workday. After asking family and friends, great recruitment places include work, schools, scouts, and churches. Tell out of town people about IMA, spread awareness about invasive plants, and encourage them to join a similar effort within their community. Finally, write to legislators about the need to ban specific invasive species sales. A number of plants are already banned and bamboo is slated to be Virginia's next.

Q: Can't anyone just go into the woods and start ripping out invasive plants?

A: No. Much thought and planning goes into an IMA site before work begins. Considerations include the best way to remove a specific species, contour of the land, reduce collateral damage on surrounding native plants, and erosion in a wetland or riparian zone. Even with the best intentions, randomly pulling weeds from the parklands may even spread the problem species. If you truly wish to physically help the parklands, join an IMA workday or invest in the training to become an IMA site leader.

If you would like to join a workday, recruit for one, or have other questions about IMA, please contact me at [greg@grsykes.com](mailto:greg@grsykes.com). Keep the questions coming!

\*A word about education and nurseries: while the push to "go native" is gaining momentum, some nursery attendants continue recommending standard invasive standbys that are sure to have high survival rates and grow like, well... weeds! Without specific requests from a customer, traditional landscaping contractors often order minimal-care plants like [Bradford pears](#), [Nandina](#), [winged burning bush](#), [Miscanthus](#) grasses, and [Japanese holly](#), not thinking about long term ecological consequences. Then, these bulk purchases keep such plants fresh in everyone's mind, and push aside consideration for responsible alternatives. Also remember that some nursery staff members are more knowledgeable than others. Beware

of plants that “naturalize” in woodlands! “Naturalize” is a nice way of saying “non-native spreading where it does not naturally grow.” I’ve had professionals try to sell naturalizing periwinkle to me after I explicitly stated that I wanted Virginia native species. The safest bet is to talk to personnel at nurseries specializing in native plants. Even better is to join an organization, such as the Fairfax Master Naturalist (<http://www.vmnfairfax.org/SitePages/Home.aspx>) or attend a fun nature walk or training session, such as those offered through Parktakes (<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/parktakes/>) and NEST (<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/nvswcd/newsletter/nest.htm>). Then, you can make your own, educated decisions.

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