

Invasive Species Profile: Chinese Privet (*Ligustrum sinense*)

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Native Range: China, Taiwan, and Vietnam

U.S. Introduction: 1852

Life Cycle: perennial shrub

Means of Spreading: berries, eaten by birds which pass the seeds; some suckering

Commercially Available: yes

Control Method: hand-pull seedlings and saplings. Mature bushes may require mechanical tools, such as a Weed Wrench. Cut down large shrubs leaving two feet of defoliated branches; continue manually removing new growth until the plant dies (takes approximately two years).

Good Alternative Species: varies, see below for suggestions



Figure 1. Compact foliage and opposite leaves characterize Chinese privet, as seen in this hedge-grown specimen.

Comments: The previous Invasive Species Profile article spotlighted [autumn olive](#) and its relatives, which are unrelated to familiar European olives (*Olea europaea*). This article focuses on Chinese privet (*Ligustrum sinense*), a true member of the olive family. Around 50 species of *Ligustrum* exist; most of them are from Asia and Europe. None of them are native to the United States, including *L. ovalifolium*, whose common name is California privet. The name “privet” derives from the word “privacy” since rows of these bushes are planted as screens.

Chinese privet was brought to North America in 1852 and appears either with solid green leaves or in a variegated form, “Variegatum.” This shrub resembles small trees when it reaches over 20 feet tall. Most often used as a verdant wall, Chinese privet grows extremely fast, necessitating frequent pruning compared to other hedge species. Given that this semi-evergreen shrub tends to drop and regrow its leaves several times during the year, it makes an unreliable screen. In winter, Chinese privet can hold its leaves and other times loses all but a few though a purple hue might infuse the retained foliage. Overall, Chinese privet often looks sickly even with high maintenance; without care, they show themselves to be the raggedy weeds that they are. The hedge surrounding the Lakeside Park parking lot contains examples of Chinese privet.

The leaves and other parts contain glycosides, rendering them poisonous to native wildlife. Some people try to extract medicine from privet but be safe and do not risk attempting it. The fruits, which ripen in autumn and stay through winter, look like dark, blue-gray mini-olives, but do not consume them since they are toxic to people! Some bird species tolerate eating the berries and disperse the seeds. These privets also vegetatively reproduce via suckering. Between the toxins and rapid propagation, Chinese privet swiftly invades local forests and fields without sufficient natural controls.

Folks wanting a native alternative to privets have oodles of choices! For a privacy screen, consider a native hedge with species like smooth witherod (*Viburnum nudum*), arrowwood viburnum (*V. dentatum*), blackhaw viburnum (*V. prunifolium*), smooth alder (*Alnus serrulata*—best in moist soil), white fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*), spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), and winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*). Mixing different shrubs into the screen adds both aesthetic beauty and resiliency in case a blight or other factors prevent one species from surviving there. Silky dogwood (*Cornus amomum*) and red osier dogwood (*C. sericea*) make successful hedges, too, though sawfly larvae can strip the greenery. For dense, evergreen borders, American holly (*Ilex opaca*) does the trick though it grows slower than the other natives mentioned.

The next edition features [wax-leaf or Japanese privet](#) (*L. japonicum*). Until then, here are some additional privet resources to investigate:

<https://www.nps.gov/Plants/alien/pubs/midatlantic/privets.htm>

<http://www.invasiveplantatlas.org/subject.html?sub=3035>

<https://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/shrub/ligspp/all.html>

https://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_lisi.pdf

<https://www.ncsu.edu/goingnative/howto/mapping/invexse/privets.html>

Weakley, Alan S., J. Christopher Ludwig, and John F. Townsend. 2012. *Flora of Virginia*. BRIT Press, Fort Worth, TX. pp. 1554. floraofvirginia.org



Figure 2. This native hedge integrates winterberry, smooth witherod, and a southern Appalachian neighbor, mountain witchalder (*Fothergilla major*, at the far right). A grassy garden path separates the shrubbery from a native meadow on the left.

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