

Invasive Species Profile: Wax-Leaf Privet (*Ligustrum japonicum*)

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

Genus Native Range: Japan and Korea

U.S. Introduction: early 1800s

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: members of *Kalmia*, great rhododendron (*Rhododendron maximum*), American holly (*Ilex opaca*)

The previous Eco-Article examined [Chinese privet](#) and the problems it causes in Northern Virginia. Keeping with the olive-themed Invasive Species Profiles, this edition sheds light on wax-leaf privet (*Ligustrum japonicum*). Also called Japanese privet, this ornamental shrub came to America shortly after 1800. The thick, glossy leaves remain evergreen. The deep green foliage densely covers the branches. All privets possess leaf pairs appearing opposite each other along the stem. Wax-leaf privet is used either in hedges or as a solitary specimen. Like Chinese privet, wax-leaf privet blossoms in late spring and produces berries lasting into the fall and winter. However, the fruits and leaves are toxic to people, pets, and most native wildlife except for some bird species capable of eating the berries. These birds subsequently spread the seeds thereby helping wax-leaf privet become an unrestrained weed. Native to Japan and Korea, wax-leaf privet lacks adequate biological and climatic controls in the southeastern United States, where it escaped cultivation and invades woodlands, meadows, and other natural areas. Though not as pervasive in Northern Virginia as Chinese privet, Invasive Management Area (IMA) volunteers routinely encounter and remove wax-leaf privet before this weed completely infests Fairfax County parks.

For evergreen alternatives to wax-leaf privet, consider native azalea relatives (not the ubiquitous evergreen Asian hybrids), such as great rhododendron (*Rhododendron maximum*) mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), or sheep laurel (*K. angustifolia*) integrated into the hedge or as an individual bush.

To join one of Royal Lake's IMA site leaders on a workday, please contact any or all of us asking to be on our volunteer distribution list(s):

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For more information on wax-leaf privets:

<http://www.invasiveplantatlas.org/subject.html?sub=3034>

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

<https://www.ncsu.edu/goingnative/howto/mapping/invxse/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

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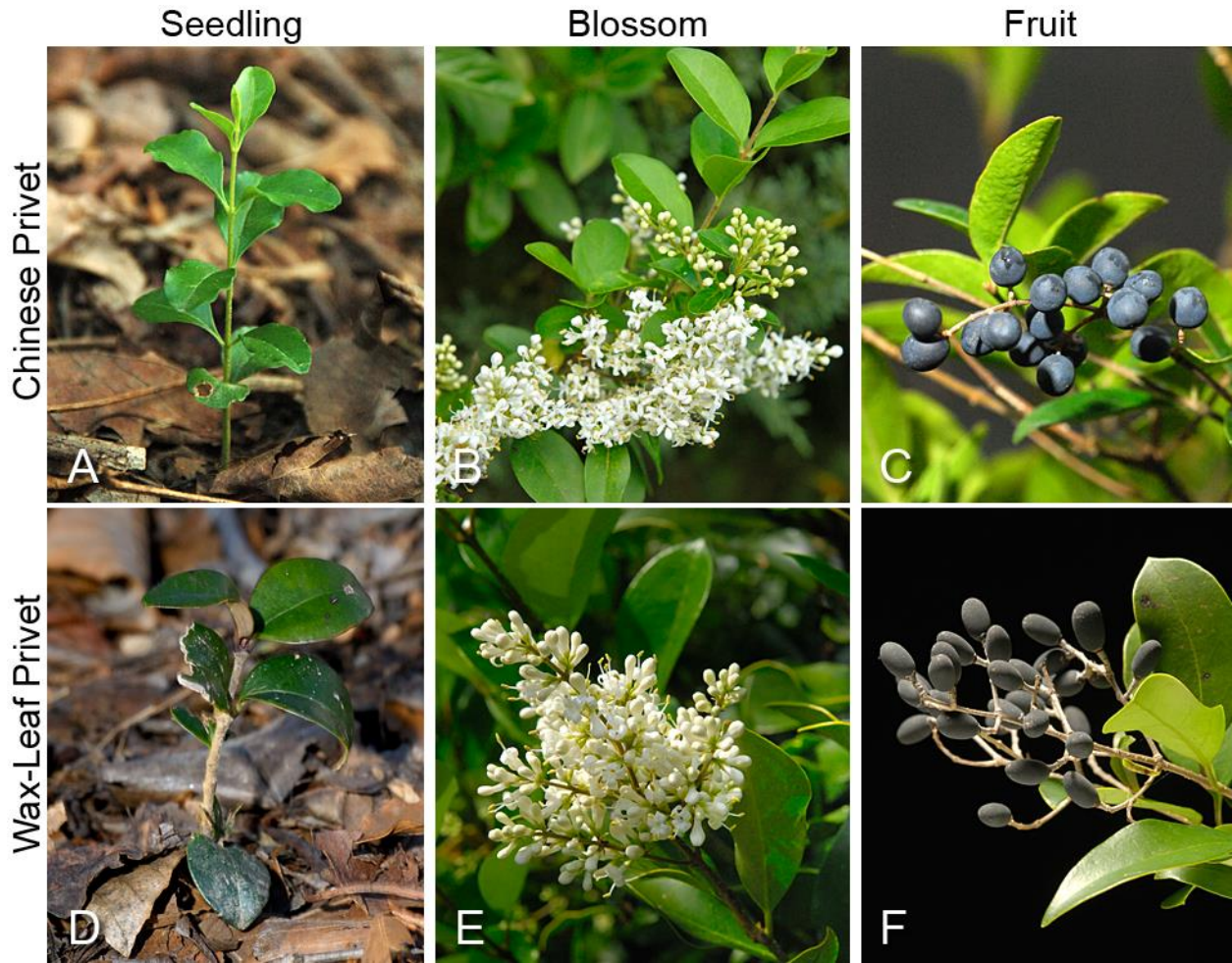


Figure 1. These images compare Chinese and wax-leaf privets. Their seedlings (A, D) look like miniature versions of the mature plants. Next to not planting any privets at all, identifying and pulling these weeds at this early stage is the second easiest way to stop them from spreading. Both species' sweet-smelling flowers bloom in early June (B, E), but the ripened fruits (C, F) cling to the branches during the autumn and winter months.

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