



Season 3 Episode 1—Year of Invasive Plants

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Narrator

From the Ground Up, a podcast of the Alabama Extension Home Grounds team educating you about home landscapes gardens and home pests.

Brian Brown

Kerry Steedley is an Extension agent in southeast Alabama, and she's here joining us today to talk about the Year of Invasive Plants. So welcome, Kerry

Kerry Steedley

Thanks, Brian. I'm glad to be here.

Brian Brown

Yeah. So tell us about the Year of Invasive Plants 2026. The Forestry and Wildlife team has come up with this and tell us all about the project that you have.

Kerry Steedley

Alrighty. So our 2026 Year of Alabama Invasive Plants, like like you were saying, Brian, it is a project that we started. We've got a lot of members on our Forestry and Wildlife team that are helping with it, but also across

other Extension teams like your your home horticulture team as well. And it was really born out of these needs assessment that Alabama Extension does that our different program teams do occasionally.

And a couple of years ago we had a Alabama landowner survey that we ran for about a year, and we asked people in Alabama was a public survey. We asked people what their interests were in programs they want to see with Alabama Extension, with, you know, what challenges they faced, and invasive plants were one of the top entries that we got out of this survey.

And then last year, we had an Extension-wide survey that anyone could participate in. And we saw the same thing that invasive plants, invasive species and their management was a real interest for our stakeholders, for people that were interested in learning more. Those educational opportunities that the Alabama Extension provides. And so kind of based on those things, that was something that we came up with as a way to address those interests, but also the needs.

Not only are we working, you know, we want to meet the needs of the people, the needs and the interest, but also what are our statewide needs across Alabama's public and private lands? Right. What are what are our land's needs? And invasive plants are one of those because we have so many. You know, we could talk about this for days and and what's all out there.

But this was a way to try and get public involvement. I'm so excited to share how people can get engaged, get involved with the project and meet some of those personal needs and also those statewide needs. So we've got some really interesting things coming up, some great incentives, some great ways to get involved. So, so be on the lookout for sure throughout the year throughout 2026.

Brian Brown

Yeah. And our team on Home Horticulture, we're also helping you out because we all know that you can't just start a project and do it by yourself. So you know, you're you and your team, you're kind of leading this effort on this. And Forestry and Wildlife is all in on this and in Home Horticulture too, because there's a lot of invasive things that affect us and you as well, and your team and everybody in the state. So we're kind of doing this together. And that's really good for us all to work together.

Kerry Steedley

Absolutely, absolutely. We've got a lot of a lot of help, a lot of new publications, new articles that people around the state on different teams are working on. So it's a good way, you know, not just for, for the public to get on the receiving end of these articles, but also kind of bring our team members together and we have more interaction and conversations about it. So I really I really enjoyed it already. Just, you know, internally and externally.

Brian Brown

Absolutely. And and we've already been through I guess a month. Well we're recording this in February, so we've already had about six weeks or so of weekly invasive plants. Correct?

Kerry Steedley

Correct. Correct. So every Sunday on our Alabama Extension Forestry, Wildlife and Natural Resources Facebook and Instagram account, we are highlighting a a different species or maybe a couple species, but we're highlighting something new every week. And the intention behind when those species are highlighted are that they have features that are easily recognizable in that season. So, for example, what we've done-- in the winter has been, you know, might be a harder time of year to do some of this, but we're we've highlighted so far things like leatherleaf mahonia, that's one of our evergreen invasives.

And how to recognize that in the winter when a lot of other species may not be as easily recognizable. So, I'm going throughout the year, we're highlighting species like Callery pear when it's in bloom, so that when it's got those standout features.

Brian Brown

You know it...

Kerry Steedley

Yeah. So it's got those standout features that you see even when you're just driving down the road and you see those bright white blooms and you can kind of connect the dots there.

Brian Brown

Yeah, well that's a great idea because people learn to recognize those things and learn how to treat them if they're following along on, on our social media and or your social media and stuff. So, what let me ask you this. What makes a plant invasive?

Kerry Steedley

That's a great question. So officially, an invasive species is one that is not native to the ecosystem that it's in, that it's present and it has to meet one of these three categories. It either has to cause some kind of environmental or ecological harm where it is, or it has to cause economic harm, some kind of impact to the economy or, or it causes some kind of harm to human health.

So it has to meet one of those three categories and be a non-native plant. And that that can get we can get into the weeds a little bit ...

Brian Brown

No pun intended, right? (laughs)

Kerry Steedley

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. With but with our, our native versus non-native. In Alabama, we've got so many distinct ecosystems. We've got the coastal ecosystems and our Appalachian our mountain it you know, our what we think is mountains in Alabama, but, very distinct.

So we can have species that are native to our coastal ecosystems but not native to maybe that northeast corner. Right. But in as in terms of the project, we're really focusing on plants that are not native to Alabama, not native to the US, mostly because we have so many of those to focus on. The that that's that's what we're trying to do.

Brian Brown

So what are some of the most populated species in Alabama that are invasive? I know you mentioned the the Callery pear or the Bradford pear. That's a that's a really big one for us on the Home Horticulture team because people, you know, they love them. But then they are pretty but they stink and they're very, very invasive, especially their progeny. When they're out in the out in the fields and they grow really big thorns. It's just really bad. So, what are some other species or what's some of the top ones in Alabama?

Kerry Steedley

Sure. In Callery pear that is one. It's got a lot of history. Some of these have a lot of history in the state. They've been here for a long time. They were brought here for, you know, specific purpose agriculture, erosion control. You know, like you said, some of them- aesthetics. So we brought them on purpose, because of how they look, we want to include them in our landscape.

And now we're seeing the effect of, you know, them escaping our our lawns, our landscapes and now they are disrupting some of these native ecosystems and crowding out our native plants. But in Alabama, of course, we've got the Callery or Bradford Pear, kudzu, the vine that ate the South. You know, many people are familiar with that one,

Chinese privet as well, super, super common plant in every single Alabama county. We've got the Chinese tallow tree, which, fun fact is now the fourth most common tree in Louisiana.

Brian Brown

Wow.

Kerry Steedley

So super invasive there. We we do not want that to be Alabama. Right. And that's what this project is aiming to address is, you know, first and and mostly that public awareness aspect. If people are at least familiar with it, then that can lead to control. So that's that first step where we want to increase that public awareness. So we don't, you know, we keep our our native forests and our native species that we have so many of in Alabama. But of course, we've got non-native bamboo very widespread in the state.

Mimosa which is another one, you know, it's pretty to a lot of people, but it's it's caused some issues. Cogongrass....

Brian Brown

Oh, that's a bad one...

Kerry Steedley

Yeah, that's a bad one that is has impacted the forest industry. Especially down here, south Alabama, it's kind of working its way. It's being found more so in north Alabama now. But

Brian Brown

And you know, there's so I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Kerry Steedley

Well, Japanese climbing fern is another one that is moving via pine straw in our in our landscape beds. And people want to put pine straw around their flower beds and, and the Japanese climbing fern, it spread by spores. So it spreads very easily. So that's one to look out for. And in all kinds of landscapes.

Brian Brown

That's, you know, and that's an interesting point you bring up is a lot of these invasives are invasive because they spread so easily. Like the spores on those, you know, they, they can be wind disseminated or, you know, like you said, people landscaping with, with the, with the pine straw that they're picking up in the, in the woods and stuff.

So these can be easily spread and you think you're doing good. And then all of a sudden you, you have an outbreak and then you're stuck with it.

Kerry Steedley

Right. Spread by birds and and that's what I tell people, you know, you may get rid of all the invasives on your property and that's great and wonderful. You still got to kind of be on the lookout for ways that they can they can be brought in and start new plants, over the years. So it's it's a difficult- it's a challenge for sure.

Brian Brown

I know in our world, of course, you know, we're dealing with homeowners and English Ivy, you know, that's one that's invasive. The heavenly bamboo or nandina that's one that people still plant in their yard. But we're still we're seeing it out in the woods now because like you said, the birds are eating the little fruit, the little berries on there, and then they're going out in the woods.

And now you have this, you know, the nandina, growing everywhere in the woods. And it was never meant to be there. We call that an escape. I don't know what your call it in the, in the forestry world, but we call that an escape.

Kerry Steedley

Yeah, I call it the same thing: escape ornamental. And and nandina for sure is one that I think we're going to be seeing more of. I mean, it's across the state that one. Right. And that one does have the capacity- it can be harmful to birds like cedar waxwing where their diet is primarily berries. So if they eat a lot of nandina, it can it can poison them because of the cyanide properties in the berries.

So kind of another reason maybe, you know, don't don't intentionally plant nandina and that and that can go into our, you know, preventative strategies is, is first starting with knowing, you know, what's not the best thing to plant in the landscape.

Brian Brown

So you mentioned prevention. What's some other ways that you can prevent other than planting these possible invasive plants.

Kerry Steedley

Yeah. And I think the the first step with prevention is knowing what is invasive around you. So you can of course you can prevent planting these these species of concern. Because they're still for sale. And, and I do want to mention this, this study from University of Massachusetts a few years ago that they looked at over 1200 invasive species in the U.S. and documented that over 60% of them were still available for sale.

Brian Brown

Wow.

Kerry Steedley

Yeah, yeah. And that may be it. You know, your your big box stores or small nurseries or online retailers too. So you, you kind of have to be-- do your digging a little bit when you're, when you're planning your landscape, making sure you're getting something that's not prone to spreading, that's not a, that's not a known invasive.

And that's a challenge. You know, I think especially for people that don't have the background in plant identification, things like that, it's it can be a hurdle to to start that journey of, you know, looking into the plant identification, looking at those scientific names. But it is really for, you know, the best interest for, for the state, for the general public and for your yard.

You know, of course, you want to see the birds. A lot of homeowners want to see the birds. And and they want to do good for the birds. So it is and part of that process. But also with that prevention aspect of things, you want to be very mindful of where soil is being disturbed. Because like you mentioned, a lot of our invasives are very quick to establish.

And the places that we encourage monitoring, even if they're not there yet, are these places where soil has been disturbed. So whether that's food plots, firebreaks, any kind of trails, if there was a storm damage somewhere, you've got some trees blown over. If the area was recently flooded, places like that. Roadsides as well, those are those are all places that are susceptible, I'd say, to to having those invasive plants kind of move in to get established.

So at least we have we have a target, you know, we have places to look out for. And and I think that's a great place for people to get started, especially, you know, landowners. But whether you have a backyard or, you know, 400 acres, these are places that you can look out for those. Or you're a community member, maybe you

don't have have land, but you're looking out, you know, around your park, around places that you visit for your recreation. And, and you can look out for these, these species in those areas.

Brian Brown

If you have these in your yard or on your land, what are some steps that you can do to help, not just prevent by keeping away from these invasive species, but also you already have it What are some control methods that you can implement?

Kerry Steedley

And there are there are several good ones out there, and it's going to depend on a few factors. Of course, we're looking at the species that you have. You know, your target species, what's going to work for that one, but also what what season are we in? If it's spring and you and those energy reserves are pushing, you know, nutrients out towards the leaves, maybe that's a time that we don't do any kind of foliar chemical control. It's not going to be translocated where we want.

But in the winter, we're speaking about this in February, in the winter, we've got some good options. With a cut stump, if you cut the base of the tree or shrub or some of our larger woody vines like, like kudzu, wisteria, English ivy. If you cut those, at the base, at the ground level, and you can treat the stump with a herbicide, something like glyphosate would work well. That's a really good option for effective control or a basal bark treatment. You use a specific herbicide. Typically that's a triclopyr ester with an oil carrier, you're treating the lower 12 to 15 inches of a stem of a smooth bark.....

Brian Brown

Like privet...

Kerry Steedley

tree or shrub. Yeah, like privet's a really good one for this. Something typically less than six inches diameter. That's a good option. That basal that basal bark spray during the growing season those foliar treatments are pretty good.

But we do have other you know, a lot of people want to stay away from the the herbicides, the chemicals. And there are ways, to kind of keep at that, to keep going. It will take more, maybe more time, maybe a little bit more labor intensive. Because if you cut it and those herbicides are not applied, it's going to resprout. So you kind of got to stay at it. Make sure those energy reserves get depleted over time.

Kerry Steedley

Or there are tools out there like a weed wrench that you can pull those kind of smaller saplings, out of the ground, and you just want to go back to those areas and monitor for any re-sprouts that could come up and, and pull those. We also say, you know, if a privet is maybe less than two feet tall, the soil is moist or loose, you can a lot of times can hand pull those out of the ground, as well.

And some other species are, are good for this hand pulling as well. When they're small you've got moist soil, that's that's a good time to do that. If you've got larger diameter trees, methods like hack and squirt where you use a machete, you go around, and it may depend on the product that you use, the chemical that you use, the herbicide.

If you make notches around the stem and you spray a herbicide in that, that's a good way to kill those larger diameter trees without having to take a chainsaw to it. But you just wouldn't want to do that anywhere, where standing dead tree-- you know where you wouldn't want a standing dead tree if it's if it's next to your house it could fall on your house. Probably not a good a good option for that for that one.

So there are lots of ways to control it. If you if you have questions, you want to talk about your situation, of course call us, call your local Extension office and we can kind of tease those details out and figure out what may be a good solution for you. But there are but there are several options. So so that's good.

Brian Brown

And we also have a lot of publications that relate to each one of these methods as well. And they, they have some- I think they've been updated recently. And so they're really good. I send them out to my clients a lot. So it's it's out there on aces.edu, if you're interested in learning more about those methods and we can, we can put some links up and, but we, you know, again, reach out to us to help identify those things if you, if you don't know what it is.

Kerry Steedley

Yeah. So that's the that's the first step. Is that identification. If we if we don't know it's a problem, we're not we're not going to be able to look for the solutions. Right. So that's that's definitely the first step.

Brian Brown

So how can people get involved with this? You know we want to eliminate these species as much as possible. We would love to eliminate kudzu; Everybody, that's always their first go to. But really, things like privet covers probably more acreage than anything in Alabama. So how can people really get involved?

Kerry Steedley

So the our 2026 Year of Alabama Invasive Plants project, we've got lots of ways people can get involved. With that social media campaign I mentioned earlier, we would love for people to like and share those posts that come out every Sunday, where we're highlighting a one or a couple species at a time, and that is that is where we're trying to increase public awareness, is through the social media.

We want to capture them at that point and bring them in to what else the project is offering. We've got classes and workshops both online, in person. We've got a lot of volunteer opportunities with partners where people can go out and have that hands-on look at these invasives and ways to control them. A lot of partners are working on this, especially in north Alabama.

North Alabama has had a lot of volunteer opportunities in the Sipsey Wilderness area, in the Bankhead National Forest, and then also around Huntsville. There's there's been several opportunities around Huntsville. And Auburn has had some as well, they'll probably have some in the future. South Alabama, we're planning some around Troy, some volunteer opportunities, some classes. And the Troy Arboretum is going to be a good partner for us down here. We're going to do some work with them at the arboretum to remove some invasive plants there. But we are we're going to update our our events list on our main web page, that's on our aces.edu website.

So if you go to our aces.edu you search 2026 Year of Alabama Invasive Plants. It will bring you to the website with links to our social media, with that event list, and also we've got a couple what I consider cool opportunities. And one is a pledge-- you can tell us about your goals for 26 and what you intend to do to kind of address the issue of invasive plants.

If you intend to control these on your own property, or join a volunteer event and control them in, you know, your community, your public public lands around you. So you can tell us about a little bit about your motivation, your background with invasive plants. We really want to know people's starting points. Because at the end of the year, it's going to be very impactful for us to know what people learn, what people took away from the project, and and if we were successful.

Kerry Steedley

And that's something that we do with Extension, of course, we want to measure that. But we hope people take away this information. They use it for years to come, right? That's that's the goal is, is that starting point.

Another component of the project is our action report form. And this is a way that people can log their hours, whether that's controlling-- any method, whether that's hand pulling, cuts down that basal bark spray that I mentioned, any way that they controlled or removed plants, they can report those hours to us.

And we've got some incentives for this. So we really want to encourage action by the public, whether you know that, whether that's private land or public lands. You go to a volunteer event and for every month that someone reports hours, reports hours worked, their name will go into a drawing for our participate our participation incentive of the month. So for February, it's a pair of loppers.

Brian Brown

Oh, nice.

Kerry Steedley

For March... Yeah, they're they're good incentives. And then for March we kind of change it up from month to month. But for March it'll be a backpack sprayer or a book bundle. So some people may not need a backpack sprayer, so they may want to go with a book bundle. So we've got some good incentives and then.

Brian Brown

Yeah, those are great.

Kerry Steedley

Yeah! And then if people report more than five hours, we we're going to have some kind of tiered incentives as well. So five hours, we've got a spray bottle that's really useful for hack and squirt or cut stump applications as well as a poster, "Invasive Plants of Alabama" poster. For 15 hours, we're going to have custom bandanas that have invasive plants on 'em, so if you're on the trail, you can put on your bandana and use it as a reference.

Kerry Steedley

And then we'll have some, some guides as well. If you report more than 25 hours in the year and we're already seeing people report their hours and, and they're getting, they're putting in some real work. So I've really enjoyed seeing that so far and how people have been engaging with with the pledge, with the action report form. It's it's been it's been great so far and it's just February.

Brian Brown

That's awesome!

Kerry Steedley

I'm super excited, yeah.

Brian Brown

Yeah, yeah. You know this is a problem that we can do something about this. You know, no matter how small or large of a problem you have with this invasive species, we can do something. We can all can do something, whether it's just pulling it out. If you see it, especially the small ones, it's much better, much easier to control at a smaller stage of development than it is when it's, you know, head high or even even larger.

Kerry Steedley

Absolutely.

Brian Brown

So let's try to, you know, learn to identify these things by watching, you know, the Facebook ads that are coming up telling about each species every week. So watch those on the Facebook and Instagram on Forestry, Wildlife and Natural Resources. Get involved, log your hours and there'll be information on our website about that. And if you need to contact Kerry or any of us Home Horticulture agents or any of the Forestry, Wildlife and Natural Resources people, you can go to aces.edu and you can find that contact information.

Brian Brown

Kerry is down in southeast Alabama. I'm up in the northwest Alabama. So, you know, we're we're scattered all over the state. So wherever you happen to be at just, you know, you can even call the local office and they can

help you get in touch with us. So learn to do that, help us take care of this problem. And let's let's try to eliminate some of these species in our in our yards, in our properties.

Kerry Steedley

Yes. There's a there's a lot of great people resources out there. Those publications that you mentioned. So a lot of people resources, educational resources, print resources, you can you can print those articles at your local Extension office. You can get them online. There are lots of apps to help with this as well. So lots of ways to to get, you know, if you're if you're just starting and, and you're starting with that identification process, there are there are guides, there are lots of there are lots of great resources, for those plant identification needs.

Brian Brown

Yeah. And we're we're here to help. That's what we do as Extension agents. We're here to help you. So feel free to reach out. So, Kerry thank you for being on the podcast and we appreciate your your effort towards this and and taking the lead on this. And, we we really appreciate all the information you've given us.

Kerry Steedley

Thanks, Brian. I'm so excited for people to get involved in and for us to meet new people around the state and, and talk more about invasive plants and hopefully do some do some removal, do some controls along the way.

Brian Brown

All right. Thanks again.

Kerry Steedley

Thanks Brian.

Brian Brown

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