

## Shifting the Lens

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Walk through any Vermont river valley or roadside and you'll see them: plants we now call "invasive," a word that frames how we understand them. Each plant carries a complicated backstory, but a key detail is that they didn't arrive here on their own. People brought them, often with great enthusiasm and planning.

Norway maple, introduced in the 1700s, became widespread in the 1930s as it was chosen to fill the empty spaces left by American elms lost to Dutch elm disease. Autumn olive was welcomed in the 1830s with silver leaves and red berries that offered gifts, food for birds, cover for wildlife, and a way to shelter hillsides worn thin by human use. In the mid-1800s, Tree of heaven was prized for its elegance and ability to grow where nothing else would. By the late 1800s, knotweed, with its bamboo-like stems, lush vegetation, and abundant roots, was welcomed for its beauty and the promise it might steady restless soils. By the 1970s, non-Indigenous Phragmites, tall and plume-tipped, were deliberately cultivated to anchor riverbanks and filter wastewater lagoons.

These introductions were celebrated. Farmers, foresters, gardeners, scientists, and conservationists all took part. They were solutions: fast-growing, hardy, adaptable. Useful. Beautiful. Ours.

But celebration turned to disappointment. And disappointment hardened into something else.

By the late 20th century, the very qualities that once drew us to these plants became the reasons for rejection. They did their job too well: growing faster, spreading further, and enduring more than we ever imagined possible. Knotweed eroded the very riverbanks it was meant to protect. Tree of heaven became host to the spotted lanternfly. Norway maple dominated the lower canopy. Autumn olive diminished insect habitat. Phragmites displaced wetlands.

We began to speak of the plants in the language of war: invaders, enemies, threats to be eliminated. The plants never changed. It was us – our expectations, our words – that did.

Yet, the way we tell the story is beginning to shift again.

If we call these species "invaders," we imply their story begins the moment we notice them in a place we don't want them. That framing erases their history: the rich, complicated backstory of

our relationship with them. Knowing the full arc of the story changes the narrative, offering perspective and opening the way to other possibilities.

If we remember that Tree of heaven's spread is tied to 19th-century city planning, that knotweed's dominance stems from our attempts to control rivers without understanding them, that Norway maple's abundance grew out of a single disease crisis, then we begin to see these plants not just as problems, but as reflections of our own histories and the forgetting of our place in relationship. What can we do differently now? How can we make planting decisions that will hold up for a hundred years, not just a season? How can we work in ways that strengthen the resilience of the ecological and social systems we are part of, rather than stress them further?

A first step is simply to talk about these plants in a way that reminds us of their history. If our words don't shift, each new challenge will feel isolated, as if it's never happened before, and we'll miss the deeper truth: our habit of pulling close what we will one day push away, repeating itself without end.

Vermont is uniquely placed to explore these questions. Ideas move quickly here, carried through close-knit communities. That closeness is rich ground for a different kind of conversation: one rooted in honesty, humility, and care.

Each of us has a role in this. It begins not with grand solutions, but with reflection. It begins with how we choose our words, in the intentional act of speaking about these plants in ways that carry their history and our part in it. Thoughtful language creates space around these questions, space wide enough to hold both the complexity of the problem and the possibility of other ways forward. Each intentional word helps shape the conditions for solutions to grow.

If we can hold this awareness -- steady, compassionate, unflinching -- our relationship with the living world can move toward reciprocity. Success can be measured not only by what we remove, but by what we choose to nurture, to restore, and to protect. In that shift, the relationship is no longer about conquering. It becomes about remembering our place within a larger living system and tending it with the same care we long to receive ourselves.