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Hockanum River committee works to rid trails of invasive species

BY BARBARA ARMENTANO ReminderNews

What do olives, chestnuts and cucumbers have to do with hiking along the Hockanum River trails? Rather than being appetizers or salad ingredients, autumn olive, water chestnut and wild cucumber are noxious, harmful invaders that destroy native plants, trees and flowers.



Brian Pillion chops a climbing poison ivy vine from a large tree. Photo by Barbara Armentano.

These and many other invasive plants grow along the Hockanum River trails and pose a significant threat to the health and beauty of the native environment . Hockanum River Linear Park Committee members who keep the trails clean and blazed are concerned that hikers do not easily recognize the poisonous and destructive species because many of the plants are quite colorful. They have no way of knowing of the impending danger posed by the plants that are not native to the area. The plants that were originally brought here for decorative purposes now spread rapidly. Human contact with them can cause allergic reactions , stinging and rashes.

Phragmites is a tall perennial grass, known locally as the "common reed." It can grow as high as 14 feet high and has a stiff, hollow stem. It bears feathery and drooping clusters of tiny purplish or white/gray flowers. Phragmites is capable of forming large strands of colonies arising from a few seeds of plant pieces along the margins of marshes and streams. Many

conservationists worry about their aggressive growth and the tendency to out compete other species.

The Department of Environmental Protection has been modestly successful trying to wipe out phragmites. They did reduce the total acreage to some degree using an environmentally safe, rapidly degradable pesticide, and managed to diversify the marsh habitat for water birds, animals and fish life with the ponds they dug.

Doug Smith, of the Hockanum River Linear Park Committee, said, "Now when we hike the Laurel Trail close to the ponds, we definitely see more water birds and fish living in these new ponds. Ducks bring in fish eggs on their feathers , and there are more types of cattails and other water plants growing in and around them."

Poison ivy is a very common plant and grows in two forms. It is familiar as it grows low to the ground, and people try to avoid it because it can cause severe skin irritation, itching and blistering. In another form, it grows as a hairy vine on upright shrubs and climbs up large trees.

Some not-so-well-known invasive plants are Japanese knotweed, common reed, Japanese barberry, oriental bittersweet , purple loosestrife, garlic mustard, multiflora rose, winged euonymus, giant ragweed, common burdock and stinging nettle.

Stinging nettle stands up to 4 feet high. If brushed by exposed skin, it can produce a sting much like the sting of a jelly fish and may result in an immediate and painful reaction. This is caused by needles which release acid as a defense mechanism.

Wild cucumber is an annual, tendrilbearing , climbing vine often reaching 20 feet long. It grows mostly in moist places and on stream banks.

Giant ragweed is a coarse, rough annual with elongated terminal clusters of nodding flower heads. It is a tall, straight stalk which grows to 12 feet tall. It is a major cause of hay fever allergies, an irritant to skin and toxic to animals.

Common burdock, a large bushy biennial , is an old world plant with globular, prickly, pink to lavender flower heads about 3/4" wide. Prickly heads of this weed catch on clothing and fur to disperse seeds. Great burdock is a larger plant that grows up to 9' tall.

More information on these and other invasive plants can be found on the Hockanum River Web site, [www.hockanumriverwa .org](http://www.hockanumriverwa.org).