

What can we do about invasive plants?

Dog-strangling vine, burdock and others pose a risk to birds, monarchs

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The parks, waste spaces and even gardens of our beautiful city contain many public enemies — non-native plants deemed alien, undesirable, foreign, noxious and/or aggressive. High on the most unwanted list are garlic mustard, Japanese knotweed, purple loosestrife, dog-strangling vine and common burdock.

I'm accustomed to seeing all of the above on my peregrinations around town and, full disclosure, even some in my own yard, where they are terminated with extreme prejudice. In the parks I frequent, however, I find these plants growing luxuriantly and, for the most part, left undisturbed.

A couple of weeks ago, though, on a ramble through Ashbridge's Bay, I noticed that patches of burdock growing along the park's footpaths looked broken, as if they had been stomped on by a herd of baby elephants practising their two-step. The plants' huge, leathery leaves, as big as the ears of the prancing pachyderms I imagined, were flattened to the ground.

I didn't have to wonder what had caused the destruction of these plants that resemble rhubarb. An experience I had had two years ago in this same park had already furnished me with the answer.

It was on a perfect summer day in 2019 that I first noticed areas of trampled burdock and wondered what had happened. When my walk took me past a pair of city workers thigh deep in a thicket of burdock, brandishing weed whackers, I was on my way to getting an explanation.

I asked one of the young men what was special about the burdock. Why knock that particular plant back but leave the ever present dog-strangling vine and garlic mustard alone?

It was simple, one of the workers said. The city had sent them out to whack back the burdock because dog owners had called the city's help line demanding its removal. Why? Because their pooches were getting the plants' annoying burrs stuck in their fur.

The two men mentioned that the city had budgeted one hour for them to deal with the burdock in the park; chuckling, they told me they realized they would be at Ashbridge's all day. Now it was my turn to laugh. It would take an army of city em-



M.L. BREAM PHOTOS

The common burdock, an invasive plant, can capture small animals like birds or bats in its barbs.



The dog-strangling vine doesn't actually strangle dogs. However, monarch butterflies, thinking the plant is milkweed, sometimes lays its eggs on the plant. Those eggs don't survive.

ployees all day every day for a week to destroy all the burdock in this park.

I've got no love for burdock myself, having had more than a few run-ins with their burrs over the years, close encounters that ruined scarves, mittens and wool sweaters. Once a burr gets into fabric, you can, with care and patience, pull out most of the seed, but bits of the tiny Velcro-like hooks remain, like a harsh word that can't be taken back.

Other than the frustration of trying to fix a few articles of clothing, I hadn't thought much about burdock burrs, dismissing them as one of life's little annoyances. I didn't know that

these prickly seeds can be a fatal hazard to small songbirds. Then I read a report by Ontario bird expert Jean Iron in the June 2002 issue of *OFO News*, the magazine of the Ontario Field Ornithologists. In her report, entitled "Kinglet Killer," Iron writes about a walk she took in a Toronto ravine in October 2001 during which she found two species of "freshly dead" kinglets that had become trapped in the burrs of common burdock.

In her report, Iron lists a variety of species that have been trapped and killed by burdock burrs, including the aforementioned ruby-crowned and gold-crowned kinglets, blue-

headed vireo, American goldfinch, ruby-throated hummingbird, yellow-rumped warbler, common yellowthroat, black-capped chickadee, blue-grey gnatcatcher, magnolia warbler, red-breasted nuthatch, pine siskin ... and even small bats!

To be caught in a burr makes for a difficult, drawn-out death. The more the little birds struggle after getting caught, the more completely they get stuck. And the burrs can be more than just an annoyance to humans. Iron says she got one of the barbed seed stems in her eye and had to have it removed by an eye specialist.

After learning about the dev-

astation caused by the kinglet-killing burdock, I am glad to know the city is making a token effort to reduce the park's burden of burdock. (I say token because for every patch of burdock knocked back, a patch four times as large remains untouched just a little further down the path.)

But what of the other invasive plants in the park?

On my most recent trip through Ashbridge's, I found more dog-strangling vine (often known by its acronym, DSV) than ever and came across a particularly triffid-like dense mat of the stuff completely engulfing some newly planted white pines. Within my small field of view, there were hundreds upon hundreds of the plants' seed pods, all within days of exploding and spreading their malevolence further.

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For those unfamiliar with DSV, it should be said that this non-native member of the dogbane-milkweed family does not actually strangle dogs. However, it most certainly does strangle other plants. It spreads very rapidly and can quickly destroy native plant ecosystems.

There's another good reason to root out DSV. Monarch butterflies sometimes lay their eggs on the leaves of DSV, thinking they are milkweed. The problem? Monarch eggs laid on DSV will not survive. Monarch eggs must be laid on milkweed leaves, the "obligate host" for the butterfly's larvae.

What can possibly be the answer to this thorny environmental issue? There is not enough money, time or energy in the world to beat back all the plants that began their existence on Earth in one part of the globe then jumped to a new part where there are no naturally occurring competitors to keep them in check.

I cannot eradicate the invasive aliens I find in my local park. But I do remove them when I find them in my own small patch of turf at home. It's the least I can do — if only for the passing dogs and itinerant butterflies.

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