Asian Bittersweet


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What Do We Know?

Asian Bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), also known as Oriental bittersweet or Round-leaved bittersweet, is a vigorous invasive vine from China, Japan and Korea. Thought to be introduced to the United Sates in 1879, it is widely distributed throughout the eastern US and Canada. Its shiny leaves and red and yellow fruits have made it popular in floral arrangements. It grows prolifically and can overtop trees with its branching vines, breaking branches and depriving the tree of adequate sunlight.

The vines of Asian bittersweet are greenish-brown and spotted with lenticels when small. When the vines thicken beyond about ½ inch in diameter, they acquire a rough inscribed snakeskin-like appearance. Leaves are shiny, round, arranged alternately, and from ¾ to 4 ¾ inches long with toothed margins. Flowers are small and green and arranged as axillary cymes. Fruits are multiple, three-valved yellow capsules which open (dehisce) and reveal red arils which cover the seeds. The roots of this vine are a distinct orange color. Young vines travel along the ground and climb nearby vertical plants. Vines can become 6 to 8 inches in diameter, will wrap tightly around other vines and will branch densely in the sunlit tree canopy.

Asian bittersweet vines grow prolifically in sunny edge habitat along woodlands and in disturbed habitats. It is not inhibited by high rainfall amounts. The seed are spread by birds and mammals. Its roots form mutualistic relationships with arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi which provide phosphorus to the vine and allow it to outcompete native plants in low phosphorus environments. All parts of the plant are mildly toxic. Asian bittersweet can hybridize with the native bittersweet vine, American bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens)*, so be certain of identification.

Control of Asian bittersweet is challenging. Young vines can be hand-pulled carefully, removing all roots. Vines climbing trees can be controlled by the curtain-cut technique - cutting vines at about chest height, then following each vine to the ground, stump-cutting the vine near the root, and treating the stump with a concentrate of glyphosate or triclopyr. Curtain cutting of vines allows for monitoring for regrowth because the trunk of the tree is cleared of invasive vines from the ground to chest height. Do not pull vines down from trees or shrubs because you may cause damage to the plant; leave upper vines to die in place. If roots are not killed, bittersweet vines will resprout from the root and continue to climb. Foliar treatment with glyphosate or triclopyr can also be successful when applied in the fall to minimize damage to other plants.

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Quick Facts

- Native vine of Eastern Asia, found throughout eastern North America.
- Large vines have snakeskin-like patterning
- Can overtop, weigh down trees and block sunlight
- Round shiny leaves, yellow and red fruits, orange roots
- Hand-pull small vines, cut and treat large vines, foliar spray in the fall

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