



Barberry grows abundantly in Cacapon Resort State Park, forcing staff and volunteers there to spend extensive money and resources to control it each year.

Dirty secrets

Where exactly did this deceptively beautiful plant go wrong? The problem is multifaceted, says Kent Leonhardt, West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture. His office was approached by various groups—farmers, landowners, and state park officials alike—concerned about the spread of this shrub beyond its intended boundaries. But it's not just that barberry can get out of hand in its growth. Barberry can also be outright dangerous.

First, it's the way it changes its environment. "Barberry actually creates a microclimate that is very good for deer ticks, which spread Lyme disease," Leonhardt says. This shrub grows thick and wild when not under the careful eye of a landscaper with gloves and pruning shears. Its multiple stems and dense clusters of alternate leaves trap cool, dark, humid spaces beneath them, a perfect environment for blood-sucking pests.

Barberry has been linked to the pervasive spread of Lyme disease and the increasing numbers of ticks in several studies. Researchers at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station found that clusters of barberry create safe havens for many times the number of Lyme disease-carrying ticks and white-footed mice, which carry ticks as well as other threats to humans, in areas without barberry.

If that's not enough reason to avoid the spiny plant, Japanese barberry also replaces native species, partly because it grows nearly anywhere and partly because, with its prickly attitude, nothing wants to eat it. "It is one of the only truly deer-resistant plants," Robinson says. This Japanese transplant can even change the soil chemistry around itself to make it less hospitable to native plants of all kinds. And these changes can be irreversible. "Cacapon State Park, for example, has a lot of this in it. The state spends a lot of money every year trying to eradicate it," Leonhardt says.

Being a natural barrier, barberry also contributes to soil erosion, especially on steep grades. "On our hills where cows feed, if the animals have a grassy field, they will walk all over and feed all over. But if there are a lot of barberry plants, the cows end up going in between the plants, walking the same way over and over again, which creates a rut. On slopes, when it rains, you can have serious erosion because of it," Leonhardt says.

On the run

In 2017, given the volume of concern over barberry, Leonhardt and the state Department of Agriculture began considering an outright ban. "Most of our members, growers, and landscapers were a little surprised when we heard it was being considered for the noxious weeds list in West Virginia," Robinson says.

The state's noxious weeds list includes well-known invasives like Japanese stiltgrass, kudzu, poison hemlock, opium poppy, and multiflora rose. Landing on this list would make barberry one of the state's most wanted plant villains, and growers would find it illegal to sell, transport, install, or cultivate it within our state's borders. Unfortunately, due to the plant's popularity, many of West Virginia's nurseries and landscapers still had many barberry plants in stock in 2017. The financial losses from an outright ban would have been harsh. "It was still popular. People were still requesting it," Robinson says.

So, when the state Legislature took up the proposed ban in 2017, she and her members requested time. The state listened. "Businesses and nurseries were given three years to sell what they had so there wasn't as much of an economic loss from it and they could replace it with another ornamental plant," Leonhardt says.