



West Virginia gardeners and landowners with barberry plants already established were also faced with a choice. They could leave their plants as is—and risk them spreading, they could try to keep them under control, or they could remove them and replace the old shrubs with something new. “If someone already has the plant, there are a couple of things they can do,” Leonhardt says. “If they are going to keep it, they should cut it back and trim it on a regular basis, so we don’t get as many berries.” Eradicating it altogether can prove to be a challenge if the plant is well-established. “They can dig it out, or they can use recommended herbicides. Their local farm and garden stores, Extension officers, and the conservation districts can all give advice.”

Many customers went to Robinson and her members for advice, especially on what to replace barberry with. The answer isn’t simple. Compact, purple-leaved cultivars of weigela might be a good option both for color and for deer resistance. Shrub roses, such as the popular Knock Out series, offer thorny dividers in the same vein as barberry. Winterberry and inkberry holly, while evergreen, are both prickly and very durable, adapting well to many soils and growing over six feet tall. Bayberries and chokeberries are also options. Still, some of these plants lack the all-around versatility of classic barberry. “I hear back from my members that there’s no perfect alternative. Frankly everyone was just used to this workhorse,” Robinson says. Finding a plant with beautiful foliage, a strong constitution, deer resistance, and the willingness to grow anywhere is a tall order. But, Robinson says, there may be a redemption in sight for barberry.

Turning over a new leaf

In fact, the noxious form of Japanese barberry isn’t the only barberry out there. “There are non-invasive cultivars that have been developed,” Robinson says. In response to many formerly popular plants ending up on the noxious weed list, horticulturists have attempted to create varieties with less spreading power and less fertility, but the jury is still out on whether any of these cultivars are worth the risk. Some studies, such as one conducted by North Carolina State University, show a marked decrease in fertility among some cultivars—as low as zero percent. “We have submitted research to the Department of Agriculture and are hoping they will take a close look at that and will consider exempting some of these cultivars,” Robinson says. Yet, according to a 2011 analysis by botanical researchers published in *BioScience*, even some of these cultivars may spread and contribute to the growing invasive species problem.

That is why, currently, no new barberry plants should be added to landscapes, Leonhardt and Robinson agree—at least not until both the science and the law come to an agreement. For now, the Department of Agriculture has left the language of the legislation open, allowing the commissioner of agriculture to exempt “certain cultivated varieties of Japanese barberry upon determination that those varieties are sterile and pose no threat to agriculture in West Virginia.”

Leonhardt remains cautious. After all, maintaining the health and vitality of the state’s ecosystems and agriculture is crucial. “We want to get control of what we have first,” he says. “And then we will be open for that discussion.” 🌿