

Invasive Species

What is an Invasive Species?

Animals and plants introduced in areas where they do not naturally occur are considered alien, exotic, or non-native. They are carried in on animals, vehicles, ships, commercial goods, produce, and even clothing.

Non-native species are the foundation of U.S. agriculture. They also are used to prevent erosion, as ornamental plants and pets, and to provide fishing and hunting opportunities. Occasionally, an alien organism flourishes, quickly dominating its new surroundings. The terms “invasive” or “nuisance” are used to describe such species.

New environments may affect rates of reproduction, susceptibility to disease, and other features that affect a species’ success. Consequently, a plant or animal that causes little damage to agriculture or natural ecosystems in one area may cause significant problems in another. Certain introduced species are very successful in their new habitats because they 1) out-compete native plants or animals and 2) have no natural controls (predators, diseases, etc.) in the new area.

At least 200 well-known, high-impact alien species presently occur in the United States. They range from nuisances like crabgrass, dandelions, and German cockroaches, to species annually costing millions of dollars to agriculture and forestry, such as the European gypsy moth. Some pose human health risks. Still others, like the zebra mussel, threaten widespread disruption of U.S. ecosystems and displacement or loss of native plants and animals.

What are the Effects of Invasive Species?

Invasive organisms cause many problems. They can displace or harm native species, degrade fish and wildlife habitat, reduce agricultural yields, hinder recreational activities, clog waterways, and disrupt ecosystems. Many destroy structures and even threaten human health. Their full effects often aren’t detected until it is difficult to control them. Invasive species cost billions of dollars every year in lost production, degraded habitat, control, eradication, research, and monitoring.

Invasive species are impacting our forests, prairies, wetlands, and waterways. For example, honeysuckle and garlic mustard are gradually replacing native understory plants in many forests. Zebra mussels out-compete native mussels in the Mississippi River, causing concerns that our native mussels may become extinct.

What Can I Do?

Natural boundaries such as oceans, mountain ranges, or deserts limited the spreading of organisms. Human activities have broken down these dispersal barriers. People transported many non-native species found in North America from other continents. Some were introduced accidentally; others intentionally for agricultural, medicinal, or ornamental uses.

- Don’t take any living material with you from one place to another.
- Check you equipment and clean it thoroughly if you visit an area with an invasive species (e.g., zebra mussels, Eurasian watermilfoil).
- Learn more about invasive species in your area and how you can volunteer to assist with local efforts to control or remove them (e.g., garlic mustard, honeysuckle).

Some Invasive Species Found in Iowa and Habitats They Impact

Common Name	Type of Organism	Forests	Prairies
black locust	plant	X	X
Canada thistle	plant	X	X
common teasel	plant		X
crown vetch	plant		X
Dame's rocket	plant		X
Dutch elm disease	microbe	X	
European buckthorn	plant	X	
garlic mustard	plant	X	
gypsy moth	animal	X	
leafy spurge	plant		X
multiflora rose	plant	X	X
musk thistle	plant		X
pampass grass	plant	X	
reed canary grass	plant	X	X
serecia lespedeza	plant	X	X
Siberian/Chinese elm	plant	X	X
spotted knapweed	plant	X	
tatarian honeysuckle	plant	X	X
white mulberry	plant	X	
wooly cupgrass	plant		X

For more information see:

invasives.fws.gov (effects of invasive species)

plants.usda.gov (Natural Resources Conservation Service) (fact sheets, photos, endangered/
threatened and invasive/introduced plants descriptions)