

Honeysuckles Are Tempting, but Plant the Right Kind



Photos to be credited to David Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension or Gary Knox, UF-IFAS Extension. See jpg file name for determining which photographer took which. Are two Coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) photos... “The native honeysuckle, which has red flowers now, is a good landscape vine to plant. However, don’t plant the invasive Japanese honeysuckle which has yellow and white flowers.”

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A member of my garden club and I were talking plants the other day, as we often do. She was saying that she simply loved her Japanese honeysuckle. “I know that it’s invasive,” she said, “but I grow it in a container so that it won’t escape into the wild.”

That was a noble thought, but planting this invasive vine in a container will not prevent its spread into neighboring landscapes and natural areas. My friend forgot about the seeds produced by this pernicious vine. Birds love the seeds and carry them far from the place of origin.

Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) is a perennial trailing or climbing vine. Leaves are evergreen in the South. Like many other invasives, it was first brought into our country as an ornamental. Beginning in the mid-1800s, it was used for erosion control and for wildlife forage and cover. Before long it escaped cultivation and proceeded to spread itself about the country, laying waste to native vegetation in its path.

It is easy to understand why gardeners want to include Japanese honeysuckle in their landscapes. Fragrant one-half to one-inch, white to yellowish flowers bloom in spring. Heavy nectar production makes it a magnet for butterflies and pollinating insects, and the seeds are attractive to birds.

Do not be fooled by these attributes, however. This honeysuckle, which is native to East Asia , including Japan and Korea , invades fields, forest edges and openings, disturbed woods, and floodplains throughout eastern

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North America . It poses a severe threat in the southeastern and eastern states (Florida to Texas , north to Kansas , Missouri , central Illinois , and New York), and is a severe potential threat in northern states outside the current range. It is found in scattered locations in California and Hawaii , and has the potential to become a severe pest in those areas.

Japanese honeysuckle spreads rapidly and out-competes native plants by vigorous above- and below-ground competition. The vine has many runners, each of which sends out more runners that root anywhere they touch the ground. Forests invaded by this vine gradually lose their natural structure as the vines cover the trees and exclude light from plants underneath. The vine is capable of engulfing small trees and shrubs and causing them to collapse under the weight. Even the root system successfully out-competes the roots of trees and other native vegetation.

Our wonderful native honeysuckle should not be confused with Japanese honeysuckle. It is easy to distinguish between the two of them by their upper leaves and their berries. The uppermost pairs of leaves of Japanese honeysuckle are distinctly separate, while those of our native trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) fuse to form a single leaf through which the stem grows. The invasive has black berries, and our native has orange or red berries. The native has beautiful orange-red flowers at this time of year. Named cultivars, or different types, of our native honeysuckle are also available in nurseries with flower colors that vary slightly from the native parent.

Japanese honeysuckle continues to grow during the winter while many other native plants are dormant. This offers a window of opportunity to spray the foliage with systemic herbicides (e.g., glyphosate and triclopyr). Healthy green leaves must be present at application time. In home landscapes where small patches may be present, repeated pulling of the entire vines and root systems may be effective.

Surprisingly, *Lonicera japonica* is still being used by some landscapers, highway designers, and wildlife managers. It provides winter forage for wildlife, particularly for deer. Landscape architects value it for its fragrant flowers and rapid growth, and highway designers continue to use it for erosion control and bank stabilization.

Japanese honeysuckle is still offered for sale by some mail-order sources. Do not be tempted to order anything labeled Hall's honeysuckle, or Chinese or Japanese honeysuckle. Many alternative plants are available that will be better suited for landscapes. Some are Carolina jessamine (*Gelsemium sempervirens*), trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*), crossvine (*Bignonia capreolata*), native wisteria (*Wisteria frutescens*), and others.

Choose one of these suitable substitutes if a vine is needed for your landscape. This is one more thing we can do to protect and to preserve the integrity of our natural areas.

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