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CHEATHAM

Harpeth Conservancy volunteers clear out invasive plants

Tony Centonze For the USA TODAY NETWORK-Tennessee

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The Harpeth Conservancy recently invited its members to participate in an MLK Day of Service.

About 20 members of the group answered the call and met late last month at Gossett Tract, a river access point within the Harpeth River State Park, to help with the clearing of invasive plants.

Park Ranger Lisa Housholder was on hand for guidance and assistance.

“We perform a variety of jobs,” Housholder said. “We do interpretive programming, park maintenance, environmental education and informative hikes. We also provide law enforcement and emergency medical response.

“We try to do events like this as often as possible. These invasive exotics can grow fast, so this is a continual battle. Volunteer groups and school groups coming to help out, go a long way toward keeping this park healthy. When people visit our parks we want them to see the native Tennessee plants, not Privet, Bush Honeysuckle or Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus Altissima*). Left unchecked, those plants can take over an area, quickly.”

The recent cleanup event began with a welcome by Harpeth Conservancy's Jane Polansky. After a group photograph, Polansky provided important information on the dangers of the exotic invasives, and discussed the processes volunteers would be using throughout the day.

“We'll be using lots of different hand tools,” Polansky said. “Safety is our primary concern. Hands, fingers, feet, toes and heads all need to remain uninjured ... Also, we're wearing our masks and distancing.”

She changed her boots, so as not to transfer seed.

“If you don't have extra shoes, make sure to kick off the soil and clean your shoes before you leave today. Lesson #1 - don't transfer the invasives. Lesson #2 is about identification.”

Polansky held up, and described, the Privet plant.

“It has very tiny leaves. They are green and glossy, opposite from one another, and mostly ovate in shape. The plant may or may not have berries. This time of year, Privet berries turn black.”

Next, Polansky picked up a spray bottle.

“This is filled with Glyphosate,” she said. “This has to be applied immediately after cutting, while the plant is still wet. We want this herbicide to get to the plant root and kill it. Lay the pulled plants leaf-end down, roots facing up.”

Gloves and tools were provided.

Polansky demonstrated the safe use of each of the cutting tools and extraction implements. She talked about disturbing the soil as little as possible, and which tools were best to use.

Once released by Polansky, the group of volunteers quickly set out along the river bank. Within minutes, countless Privet plants were pulled up by their roots, sprayed with Glyphosate, and piled in a graveled area.

Polansky then stepped away for a few minutes to talk about Harpeth Conservancy.

“We are a 501 3c organization,” Polansky said. “We encourage people to participate and gain an understanding about matters that can affect our water quality. We also encourage folks to engage in activities that help protect and preserve our wildlife, ecosystems, and water quality.”

“We have a great turnout, today. As a group, we try to do something at least once a month. We have several different monthly programs. Our “Conservation Conversations” are always held on the fourth Wednesday of the month at 6 p.m. Those are virtual. We also do monthly “Lessons on the River” to complement our CC topic, or some other aspect of water quality.”

Polansky's main concern at the group's most recent event was the removal of Privet. Harpeth Conservancy has a March event scheduled that will focus on planting trees at Burns Park in Kingston Springs.

“Our 2021 schedule is not out yet,” Polansky said. “But, throughout the year, we'll be offering individual programs, and continue working on the removal of this and other invasives.”

Invasive species cost us \$120 billion annually in damages to crops and food production. These invasives will get in and destroy the natural foods of our farm animals. As a result, you may see the price of your steak or produce go up. Someone is having to spend money to control these invasive species.

“All of our programs are designed for awareness, and whenever possible we host events that get us out on the waterways. We do canoe floats down the river and identify spots along the way that need our attention. Then we make plans to come back and work in those areas.

“These plants overtake the native species. They soak up all the nutrients, create excessive ground cover, and block sunlight from the trees and other native plant life. Their berries are transported by birds. And those berries are toxic to pets, wildlife and humans.”

For more information or to get involved, go to www.theharpethconservancy.org or Google Harpeth Conservancy.