

# Conservation Montgomery

*Working together to enhance our quality of life*

## Finding our Voice

*Perspectives from the CM Board of Directors*

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### **A Hands-On Way to Preserve Montgomery County Forests**

By David Hauck, Conservation Montgomery Board of Directors

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We live in a county that enjoys nearly 34,000 acres of forested parks that give us the chance to get outside and appreciate nature. But as you hike the many miles of trails that run through these parks you may have noticed thick tangles of vines engulfing trees and areas where the ground cover consists of a single type of plant. If you thought this might be bad for the health of our forests, you would be right. If you thought there isn't much you could do about it, then read on.

Non-native invasive plants—the majority of those vines and monoculture ground cover—pose a real threat to Montgomery County's forests and native ecosystem. Typically, they grow extremely fast and have few natural restraints on their explosive growth. Invasive plants—such as Oriental bittersweet-- strangle and overtop trees, eventually killing them. With their rapid growth, invasives shade out native plants. Some invasive understory plants—garlic mustard, for example-- even produce compounds that inhibit the germination of the seeds of other plants—talk about chemical warfare! And, because local wildlife has evolved to depend on native plants, when invasive plants spread, native animals suffer.



--Oriental Bittersweet: Max Williamson, USDA Forest Service, [Bugwood.org](http://Bugwood.org)



--Oriental bittersweet: Nancy Loewenstein, Auburn Univ., [Bugwood.org](http://Bugwood.org)

When confronted with scenes like these, it's easy to get discouraged. But groups of volunteers have shown that non-native plants can be rolled back and the health of our forests restored by the hands-on pulling and cutting down of mature invasives and by making return visits to remove new invasive shoots. The Sierra Club in Montgomery County leads [invasive plant removal events](#) at three local parks each month. I've joined the group working in the Underground Railroad Experience Park near Olney several times over the last two years and the changes have been dramatic. Oriental bittersweet vines (a prevalent non-native that can decimate a forest) which once overran sections of the woods on either side of the trail have been cut back and native plants are now returning. Just as rewarding is having the chance to spend some time getting to know one section of a park extremely well and meeting others who share my appreciation of nature.

It's easy to get involved. The first step is to participate in an invasive plant removal event. In addition to the Sierra Club events, Montgomery County Parks [lists](#) several others. Each event is led by one or more "Weed Warrior" supervisors who show you how to tell the difference between native plants ("don't pull") and invasives ("pull"). Bring leather gardening gloves, pruning shears and saws if you have them. If you don't, you can borrow them from the leader. You'll spend two to three hours in the woods—bring a water bottle—and you'll leave with a sense of accomplishment. At the Sierra Club events we often have parents and kids, Scout troops, students accumulating volunteer hours and faith-based groups wanting to engage in a volunteer project.

The next step is to become a certified "Weed Warrior" yourself. Montgomery County Parks created this program in 1999 to teach people how to recognize and remove non-native plants in the parks. As you can imagine, the training is important since a well-intentioned and eager volunteer who has trouble telling the difference between a native and a non-native plant can cause more harm than good.

The training consists of a two-part online course and a two-hour field training led by park personnel every month from April through October. To sign up for the "Weed Warrior" training call 301-962-1343 or go to the [site](#). After completing the training, you can start uprooting non-native plants in any of the Montgomery County parks. The only restriction is that you work alone or with other Weed Warriors—a good reason to get a hiking partner, friend, spouse or anyone else you want to spend a lot of time in the woods with to take the training with you.

Finally, if you want to lead groups of people who are not weed warriors into the parks, you can become a "Weed Warrior Supervisor." After being a weed warrior for a year, you then do additional training with a Montgomery County Parks specialist in the control of non-native plants.

After participating in several invasive removal events over the past two years, I've decided to sign up for "Weed Warrior" training this year. Maybe we'll see each other in one of the field training classes or at an invasive removal event in one of the parks.

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The views of a particular Board Member of Conservation Montgomery may not reflect the views of each Board member or their respective organizations on every topic covered in the *Finding our Voice* op/eds.