

Weeds in the Garden

Common Buckthorn

Common Name: Common buckthorn

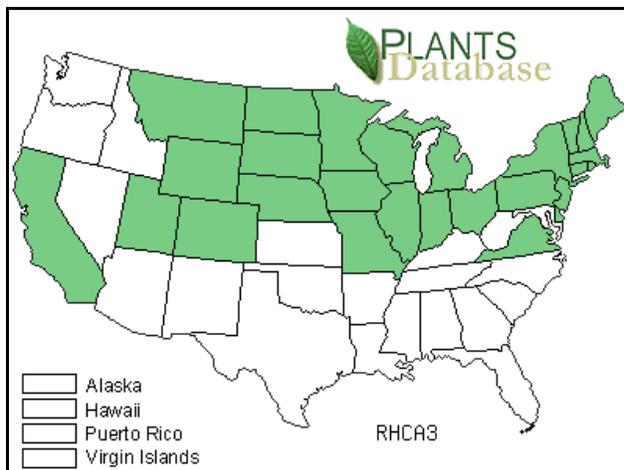
Scientific name: *Rhamnus cathartica*

Characteristics: Buckthorn grows to be a large shrub or small tree 20-25 feet in height and up to ten inches diameter at the base. Its leaves are dull green, egg shaped or elliptical, and are bluntly toothed. The branches are often spine tipped. Flowers are small and greenish and grow in axillary bunches. Female plants bear clusters of black, rounded berries.

Origin: This species originated in Eurasia and was introduced to North America as an ornamental shrub. It was planted in hedge-rows in Wisconsin as early as 1849.



Current Range: Nova Scotia to Saskatchewan, south to Missouri, east to New England



“Look Alikes”: Glossy buckthorn is also an exotic invasive. It has glossy leaves and no teeth on leaf margins. It is an aggressive invader of wet soils, but also grows in upland sites. Alder buckthorn and lance-leaved buckthorn are both native species. They are small shrubs less than three and six feet in height respectively. Lance-leaved buckthorn is found in bogs and swamps, while common buckthorn prefers well drained soils.

Habitat: Common buckthorn grows in thickets, hedgerows, pastures, abandoned fields, roadsides and rocky areas. It also grows in the understory of some forest types. It prefers well-drained soils.

The Problem: Common buckthorn has a number of adaptations that allow it to invade and dominate native habitats. It is a prolific seed producer and its seeds are often ingested by birds. Ironically, these seeds have a diarrhetic quality that can cause energy loss in birds that feed on them, but increase the bird's droppings. This adaptation may help the buckthorn to spread its seeds in the immediate local area in what is likely to be similar suitable habitat.

Solutions:

Prevention – Common buckthorn is still sold as an ornamental plant. Education and citizen awareness can play a huge role in controlling this exotic species. Gardeners and landscapers can slow its spread by eliminating its use in yards and gardens. Plants already in cultivation can be removed and destroyed.

Mechanical – Annual or bi-annual burns in early spring or late fall can be effective methods in fire-adapted communities. Simple cutting of stems may result in re-sprouting and is not recommended unless chemical treatments are to follow. Hand removal by pulling can work for smaller plants, but the soil disturbed by pulling should be tamped down to discourage new seedling germination.

Chemical – Chemical herbicides can be used in late fall after most native plants have gone dormant. Buckthorn will be easy to see, as the leaves will be green long after native plants have turned or dropped their leaves. For larger bushes, cut off the stems near ground level and apply Glyphosate directly to the stump. Treating leaves with Glyphosate is also effective but is recommended for areas where large stands of buckthorn need to be treated. For severely disturbed areas a Triclopyr solution diluted in water can be applied to stumps. Prior to use of chemical herbicides, it is important to consult with local natural resource staff to determine which herbicides would be the most effective and would have the least impact on native species. It is also essential to follow safety instructions on the selected product.

**For more information please contact the
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