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**Date: February 17, 2010**

## **Buckthorn**

You don't want buckthorn on your property. It's not good for deer and it really doesn't have thorns. Such is the oddity of common names, sometimes.

Eliminating buckthorn will improve the habitat on any property.

Buckthorn is one of the few really nasty, invasives in forests. The species will gradually overtake the entire understory, unless conditions are particularly shady or dry. It's commonly seen in wetlands and under powerlines. Many people mistakenly call it tag alder. It's hard to believe that one would long for tag alder, but it beats the heck out of buckthorn.

Buckthorn casts dense shade. Native herbs and shrubs lose out. Tree regeneration fails. The structure and fruits provide benefits to some wildlife species, but nothing as rich as the native flora.

Actually, there are three species of buckthorn. Two are exotics. One is native. All are in the genus *Rhamnus* (in case you want to find more information on the Internet). *R. cathartica* (common buckthorn) and *R. frangula* (glossy or European buckthorn) are the bad guys. *R. alnifolia* (alder-leafed buckthorn) is the native, but it's not nearly so common as the other two.

Common buckthorn tends to grow more in and around wetlands. Glossy buckthorn has a bit stronger preference for upland soils. Neither does particularly well on sand. Alder-leafed buckthorn also prefers wetlands but the leaves are different from its evil cousin. The leaves are more like the glossy buckthorn.

It's good to know how to identify these noxious pests. The leaves are rather plain-looking and you can use that ID feature, sometimes. If you scrape the stems, you'll notice that the inner bark is often bright yellow and smells a bit like squashed ladybugs.

The flowers and fruits are distinctive. They grow in small clusters and the fruit turns from red to black. Some folks mistake them for cherries. I was busy chopping-out a bunch of buckthorn one day, and my neighbor happened by and asked why I was cutting down all the cherries.

Eradicating buckthorn is impossible. However, by taking a serious whack at it, the native plants will sometimes take advantage of the temporary demise of buckthorn.

During the winter, I spend a fair amount of quality machete time. Chopping buckthorn would probably be more effective around mid-June, but that's also when the mosquitoes are really bad and the wetlands are wet. Winter is more pleasant.

Come spring, the cut buckthorn stumps sprout back vigorously. It's amazing. No wonder the native plants don't stand a chance. However, after that thick flush of growth forms a nearly complete canopy of leaves, it's also the perfect surface to collect herbicide. I generally spray in late September or early October. By then, many of the native herbs have gone dormant. The collateral damage from the herbicide is minimized. Sometimes, I have to return to an area to spot spray the next season. Buckthorn is a tough customer.

There is no easy way to get rid of buckthorn. It takes physical work and persistence. The visual quality of removing buckthorn is immediate. The woods at least appear a bit more native without the thick stands of buckthorn. More rewarding is watching the native vegetation respond over the next few years. Given a sporting chance, quite a few species increase their presence. But this is a case where human intervention is needed.

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Feel free to contact me if you have questions about this article or natural resources and natural resource management in general. The entire collection of articles can be viewed on the Michigan Society of American Foresters website <http://michigansaf.org/ForestInfo/Newspaper/0000-Directory.htm>.

*As an MSU Extension forester, I provide educational programming for the entire Upper Peninsula. My office is located at the MSU Upper Peninsula Tree Improvement Center near Escanaba. The Center is the headquarters for three MSU Forestry properties in the U.P., with a combined area of about 8,000 acres*

**More information on Buckthorn can be found at:**

Common buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*):

Pictures: <http://www.oseh.umich.edu/ncwc/pdf/Common%20Buckthorn.pdf>  
[http://web4.msue.msu.edu/mnfi/education/factsheets/Rhamnus\\_cathartica.pdf](http://web4.msue.msu.edu/mnfi/education/factsheets/Rhamnus_cathartica.pdf)

More detailed info: [http://wiki.bugwood.org/Rhamnus\\_cathartica](http://wiki.bugwood.org/Rhamnus_cathartica)

Glossy or European buckthorn (*Rhamnus frangula*):

Pictures: [http://web4.msue.msu.edu/mnfi/education/factsheets/Rhamnus\\_frangula.pdf](http://web4.msue.msu.edu/mnfi/education/factsheets/Rhamnus_frangula.pdf)

More detailed info: [http://wiki.bugwood.org/Frangula\\_alnus](http://wiki.bugwood.org/Frangula_alnus)

Native (alder-leafed) buckthorn (*Rhamnus alnifolia*):

Picture and drawings: <http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=RHAL>

**Note:** There seemed to be some confusion on the common names of these species—the additional info sources use the terms differently than Bill Cook did in his article. If you plan to do further research on the internet, **be sure to use the Latin name** and read carefully.