DON'T BE DECEIVED BY THE BEAUTY OF THIS ALIEN INVADER.

WHILE WALKING THE CANAL ROAP BEHIND MY HOUSE, A FLASH OF COLOR AT THE WATER'S EDGE CAUGHT MY EYE.

Bold magenta flowers in dark green dress cast a pleasant relief to the summer's faded grasses.

Why, then, did this lovely plant set off a little alarm in my head?

FROM THE DARK SIDE

I recognized this plant as an alien invader of wetlands, the runaway escapee from the flowerbeds of bygone years. It was purple loosestrife (Lythrum salicaria), once a noble and prized garden flower but today a floral renegade turned to the dark side.

Originally from Eurasia and Great Britain, the strikingly colorful loosestrife can grow 8 to 10 feet tall. Such an imposing plant with spike-like clusters of showy pink-purple flowers has made the plant popular historically.

Purple loosestrife is said to have entered the northeastern U.S. and Canada--both accidentally--in the 1800s as seeds in the holds of European ships, as well as intentionally planted for its beauty and medicinal uses. It has steadily spread throughout the United States, often escaping downstream from urban areas so it now occurs in every state except Florida. In many parts of our country, the plant is creeping its way along wet areas toward problem-hood.

SEEMINGLY UNSTOPPABLE

Purple loosestrife doesn't require much pampering. It can reproduce in two very abundant ways. Each year, new stems sprout from the roots of the previous year's growth, keeping the plants steadily spreading from original sites. Additionally, mature plants can bear as many as 30 clusters of colorful flowers, with the capacity for producing between 2 and 3 million seeds each year. Thus the beautiful loosestrife creeps across the landscape.

So what's the problem? Can't our countryside use an added dash of color? The invasive perennial takes over greenbelts and wetlands, rapidly diminishing their value as wildlife habitat. For example, muskrats use cattails for building homes and food, shunning the loosestrife. Waterfowl, especially ducks, avoid wetlands taken over by loosestrife. This invading plant clogs up the marshes so much that waterfowl reproduction drops. Wetlands habitat is already under siege from development and urban sprawl. America's waterfowl and wetland wildlife don't need this added stress on their already-shrinking homes.
There's a built-in boost given to invasive species. Their rampant spread is at least partly due to their advantage of having left their natural enemies behind in their homeland, resulting in little resistance from their host environment. Thus, we've had to figure out how best to curb the spread of our strife on the loose.

TAKING CONTROL

Good old-fashioned digging up and disposing of the plant works with small, spotty infestations. Several years ago, I took my college ecology class on a field trip to the canal bank behind my house for just such an exercise in loosestrife control.

That same day we visited the Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge, where we viewed one marsh nearly taken over by the purple invader. Obviously in that case, more extreme measures must be taken to control the pest.

Once loosestrife has gained a sizable foothold in such areas, it requires either chemical herbicides or biological control. For natural biocontrol, several varieties of insects (beetles and weevils) naturally feast on loosestrife; some feed on its roots, and others munch on its leaves and flowers. Either way, the spread of the plant is checked.
Today, purple loosestrife is so widely recognized as a habitat threat that it's on the invasive species radar everywhere. Many organizations and agencies throughout North America are uniting in cooperation to control its spread. Locating critical spots of loosestrife invasion and working toward its eradication could be a potential project for Scouting units or Eagle Scout projects.

Sadly, loosestrife is just one of many invasive plant species posing similar problems across our land. Whether it's kudzu in the Southeast cheatgrass in Western rangelands or water hyacinth in our waterways, all threaten our wildlife habitat and croplands in many different ways.

Meanwhile, back on my canal bank, loosestrife and I stand in a faceoff. Thinking foremost of wildlife, I decide to go back for my shovel. I feel an obligation to healthy wetlands. As I saunter homeward for my digging weapon, I do so with the hope of striking at least one more blow against this invasive strife on the loose. WHAT OTHER NATURAL WONDERS MIGHT AWAIT? FIND OUT IN FUTURE EPISODES OF THE CONTINUING ADVENTURES OF DOC HAWK.

Source Citation  (MLA 8th Edition)