

# Invasive Alien Plant Species of Virginia

## Japanese Honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica* Thunberg)

### Description

Japanese Honeysuckle is a trailing or twining woody vine that can grow to more than 30 feet in length. Young stems are often hairy; older stems are hollow with brownish bark that may peel off in shreds. The simple, opposite leaves are oval to oblong in shape and range from 1.5 to 3 inches in length. In much of Virginia, leaves of Japanese honeysuckle are semievergreen and may persist on vines year-round. The extremely fragrant, two-lipped flowers are borne in pairs in the axils of young branches and are produced throughout the summer. Flowers range from 1 to 2 inches in length and are white with a slight purple or pink tinge when young, changing to white or yellow with age. The fruit is a many-seeded, black, pulpy berry that matures in early autumn. Japanese honeysuckle is distinct from our two native honeysuckles, the trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), and wild honeysuckle (*Lonicera dioica*). These natives both bear red to orange-red berries, and their uppermost pair of leaves is joined together.

### Habitat

Japanese honeysuckle occurs primarily in disturbed habitats such as roadsides, trails, fencerows, abandoned fields and forest edges. It often invades native plant communities after natural or human induced disturbance such as logging, roadbuilding, floods, glaze and windstorms, or pest and disease outbreaks.

### Distribution

Japanese honeysuckle is native to eastern Asia. Introduced to cultivation in 1862 on Long Island, Japanese honeysuckle is now widely naturalized in the eastern and central United States. Japanese honeysuckle was, and in some areas still is, planted as an ornamental ground

cover, for erosion control, and for wildlife food and habitat. In Virginia, Japanese honeysuckle is naturalized statewide, being most abundant in piedmont and coastal plain forests.

### Threats

Where light levels are optimal, such as in forest edges, canopy gaps or under sparse, open forest, newly established Japanese honeysuckle vines grow and spread rapidly. Suppressed vines growing in dense shade, however, are capable of rapid growth and spread when light levels in a habitat are increased by disturbance. In forests, Japanese honeysuckle vines spread both vertically and horizontally by climbing up tree trunks and/or by trailing or clamber-



Japanese Honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*)

For more information, contact the Department of Conservation and Recreation or the Virginia Native Plant Society.



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ing over the forest floor and associated vegetation. Trailing vines produce stolons which root when they contact soil, aiding the vegetative spread and persistence of the species.

Dense, strangling growths of Japanese honeysuckle can impact desirable vegetation by decreasing light availability within the habitat, depleting soil moisture and nutrients, or by toppling upright stems through the sheer weight of accumulated vines. Negative effects of Japanese honeysuckle invasion include development of malformed trunks in trees, suppression of plant growth, inhibition of regeneration in woody and herbaceous plants, and alteration of habitats used by native wildlife.

### Control

Small populations can be controlled by careful hand-pulling, grubbing with a hoe or a shovel, and removal of trailing vines. In old fields and roadsides, twice yearly mowing can slow vegetative spread, however, due to vigorous resprouting, stem density may increase.

In pine plantations or in fire-dependent natural communities, Japanese honeysuckle can be controlled

by prescribed burning. Burning can greatly decrease the abundance of Japanese honeysuckle within a habitat and limit its spread for one or two growing seasons.

Where prescribed burning or mowing is difficult or undesirable, Japanese honeysuckle may be treated with a glyphosate herbicide. Glyphosate is recommended because it is biodegradable and will begin to break down into harmless components on contact with the soil. However, it is nonselective and will affect all green vegetation. Therefore it is best applied to the semievergreen leaves with a spray or wick applicator in late autumn when other vegetation is dormant but Japanese honeysuckle is still physiologically active. Reapplication may be necessary to treat plants missed during the initial treatment. To be safe and effective, herbicide use requires careful knowledge of the chemicals, appropriate concentrations, and the effective method and timing of their application. Consult a natural resource specialist for more information on herbicide use and prescribed burning techniques.

### Suggested Alternatives

Some native alternatives to Japanese

honeysuckle for use in home landscaping include trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*), Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), and trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*). Wild ginger (*Asarum canadensis*) makes an excellent ground cover in shady areas. All these species are easy to cultivate, have wildlife and aesthetic value, and can generally be obtained from commercial sources or propagated by wild-collected seeds or cuttings.

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