

# CHINESE PRIVET

## Overruns Fields, Forests, and Bottomlands



Chinese privet shrubs fill the understory of this open forest, stealing water and nutrients from the trees and shading out saplings and wildflowers.

### The Culprit

Chinese privet (*Ligustrum sinense*) is an evergreen to semi-evergreen shrub that is one of the most widely-found invasive plants in the South. First brought to this country in 1852 as an ornamental hedge plant, it was recognized as seriously invasive in the 1950s. This destructive weed now infests areas from Florida to southern New England and westward to parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. It can form large monotypic stands and impenetrable thickets that destroy wildlife habitat. Because it grows and seeds itself so fast, this plant dominates the shrub layer of the locations it invades, choking and shading out desirable plants. Where well established, its aggressive growth makes controlling privet a seemingly impossible task. Deer browse on privet, but not enough to control it.

All other species of privet, which are also grown as hedges or privacy screens, are invasive. Not only do these shrubs destroy natural landscape and wildlife habitat, they can harm people directly. The fruits are poisonous if eaten and the floral fragrance can cause respiratory problems if privet is concentrated in an area. Privet species and cultivars are still being sold in nurseries and garden centers. Please do not plant them!

### Known Hangouts

Chinese privet isn't fussy – it can invade any habitat. Although it thrives with lots of sunlight and soil moisture, it hangs out in natural and agricultural areas that offer a wide range of soil and light conditions. It grows with abandon in situations from very moist to somewhat dry and from full sun to part or light shade. It forms dense brush in upland and floodplain forests, fields, hedgerows, and old homesteads, and along roadsides, stream-

banks, and riverbanks. Once established in an area, this shrub pops up nearby, especially anywhere the soil is disturbed.

### Modus Operandi

Privet produces numerous suckers from its shallow, wide-spreading roots. Any attempts at cutting back the top growth only incites the root system to send up a colony of fast-growing stems. Privet seeds are not long-lived, perhaps remaining viable in the soil for only a year. However, they are produced in such vast quantity and germinate so readily that their short viability hardly seems to matter. Seeds that fall to the ground germinate nearby. These aggressive methods of propagation drive this invasive's propensity to form thickets. Birds and mammals feast on the ripe fruits, dispersing seeds far and wide.

### Positive Identification

Chinese privet is a large, multi-trunked shrub that can grow to 30 feet tall, but typically ranges from 10 to 15 feet in height. Leaves are evergreen to semi-evergreen and arranged opposite each other on the twigs. Elliptical in shape, they are 1 to 2 inches long, and half as wide and are held flat in a single plane. The leaves have smooth edges and are glossy dark green on top and light green on the bottom. Fine hairs cover the leaf stems (petioles) and line the midribs on the leaf undersides and may even cover the entire undersides. Dense, light brown hairs coat the young twigs. Older twigs exhibit raised, tan-colored bumps (lenticels). Bark on the main stems is smooth and light brown.

White or off-white flowers bloom profusely in branched, 2- to 4-inch-long clusters in June and can be quite showy. Individual flowers have four petals fused at their bases; these sit in a small, green, cuplike structure (calyx). Each flower has one pistil (female structure) and two stamens (male structures) that extend beyond the petals. These protruding stamens are helpful in identifying Chinese privet. Blue-black, berrylike fruits create showy clusters, which seem to be sitting in a leafy bowl, beginning in August and lasting into winter.

All privets have opposite leaves. You can tell Chinese privet from other privets by looking for dense hairs on the twigs and petioles and along the midribs on the leaf undersides. Look also for two protruding stamens in the flowers. Japanese privet (*Ligustrum japonicum*) closely resembles Chinese privet, except that its glossy green, evergreen leaves are



Leaves of all privets are arranged opposite each other on the twigs and in a single flat plane.

twice as large and its twigs are hairless. Common Privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*), a European species, which is seriously invasive in cooler areas of the East Coast, may be found in Virginia. It is deciduous, has sparse hairs on its twigs, lacks hairs on leaf undersides, and its stamens do not extend past the petals. Border privet (*Ligustrum obtusifolium*) is seriously invasive in South-west and Northern Virginia and is likely underreported in the Blue Ridge. Its semi-evergreen leaves are blunt and measure 1 to 2 inches long; twigs are hairy; flowers fragrant. It spells trouble in woodlands.



**Left:** Chinese privet blossoms are showy and fragrant. **Right:** Blue-black berries attract birds and mammals in fall and winter.

## Mistaken Identity

No matter which privet species is infesting your land, get rid of it! There are no native plants that resemble privet.

## Control

Search for privets near and at a distance from known infestations and hedge plantings. Act swiftly to destroy any new incursions. If you catch an invasion early, you may be able to stop the shrub in its tracks. Well-established thickets resist



A thicket of resprouts occurs at the base of large privet shrubs where it was mowed along a roadside.

control and may take several years to eradicate. While mechanical methods can set back a privet colony, the soil disturbance involved usually opens the door for seeds already in the soil to germinate. A combination of mechanical and herbicide control methods usually works best.

**Manual & Mechanical:** These methods often require follow up with foliar herbicides or cut-stump herbicides to be effective because any root pieces left in the ground will resprout.

Small seedlings can be hand-pulled. Larger shrubs can be dug out with a mattock or pulled out with a Weed Wrench®. However, re-sprouting is likely and makes these methods labor intensive. Another way is to cut down privet thickets with a chainsaw or brush-cutter or mow invaded fields and roadsides. You'll need to repeat these

methods several times during the growing season and for several years to weaken the invasive shrubs; this is time consuming and only slowly effective. Extensive infestations of mature tall privet in open areas may call for a forest mulcher, which can grind huge plants to ground level quickly and efficiently.

**Grazing:** Goats may be used to control privet, if they are grazed heavily in spring and early summer. They must be grazed for several years to kill the shrubs, but be aware that goats usually eat anything else that attracts them.

**Burning:** Prescribed burning kills privet stems, but not the roots; these resprout vigorously. Use fire to reduce the mass of privet stems and foliage in fields, then foliar-spray new growth.

**Cut Stump:** This is an effective way to control privet. Cut or saw stems with loppers, a handsaw or a chainsaw, near ground level; immediately apply a concentrated, recommended herbicide to the cut stump. Monitor treated stumps for resprouts; cut stump any new growth, or use a foliar spray on the new leaves.

**Foliar Spray:** Chinese privet may be effectively controlled with foliar sprays if you pay careful attention to application timing and herbicide concentration. The recommended herbicide is of a concentration higher than is needed to control most invasive plants. Because nearby desirable plants may be injured by spray drift when large shrubs are treated, cut or saw privets taller than 4 feet to a manageable size. Then spray the regrowth. This method also reduces the amount of herbicide needed. You will avoid damaging nearby plants if you spray privet, which is evergreen, in late fall or early winter when deciduous plants have dropped their leaves. Apply the herbicide on a mild day from November through January when it is above freezing.

**Basal Bark:** Extensive colonies of tall privets can be controlled with basal bark applications if stems are smaller than 6 inches in diameter. This is less labor intensive than cut stump-ing. Some pruning and cutting back of lower branches may be necessary beforehand, however, to allow access. Paint or spray the entire circumferences of the lower 12 inches of each stem with a concentrated, recommended herbicide mixed with vegetable or mineral oil along with a penetrant. Monitor for resprouts and treat as needed. Basal bark treatments can take a few months to kill privet, but are very effective.

No single treatment eradicates privet. Almost always, new seedlings and reprints emerge the year after intensive control measures are undertaken. Have patience and keep at it!



Privet seedlings have two-ranked leaves in a flatplane.

For currently approved herbicide recommendations, check the Virginia Department of Forestry chart *Non-Native Invasive Plant Species Control Treatments*, which you can download from the Blue Ridge PRISM website.