

Treeways

2025 1

Where Has All the Buckthorn Gone?

When my wife and I moved to Sunfish Lake in 2005 nearly all wooded property throughout the City was thickly covered by a tangled understory of invasive buckthorn, honeysuckle, and amur maple. There were also a good number of old native trees including red, white, and bur oaks in the 125-150 year old range. It reminded me of the frightening forest from the Hansel and Gretel story. Thick dark woods with narrow paths ready to swallow up unwary hikers.

Native trees and woody plants currently make up 10% or less of the trees in areas dominated by buckthorn and other woody invasive species. The City supports invasive species control and management. No permit is required for invasive species removal (buckthorn, honeysuckle, amur maple, garlic mustard, etc.) as long when the soil area disturbed is less than one acre. If the area involved is more than one acre, (43,560 square feet) then there is a state permit required. For most of us an area roughly 209' X 209' (one acre) is a big enough area to tackle for a one-year buckthorn and other invasive species removal project. More invasive species removal can be done the next year following a long-term plan to successfully manage woody invasive species into the future. Goats can be part of that management plan.

Many property owners have taken it upon themselves to remove and control woody invasives, leading to a visually dramatic opening of previously closed-in woodland areas. The City Forester is commonly contacted at this point by a neighbor to investigate a "clear cutting" incident because sightlines through a woodland are open again after 30 or more years of buckthorn green screening. There may have been one actual "clear cutting" incident during my time as City Forester, while there have been many buckthorn and woody invasive species removal projects. Additional woody invasive removal has occurred in association with new home construction and major remodeling projects.

The result of all this woody invasive removal and control is a partial return to how Sunfish Lake looked 50-60 years ago. In a sense, we have together turned back the clock to when our woodlands were much more open and neighbors, while far apart, could still see each other. That past open woodland was perhaps a safer, more welcoming environment than the thick, tangled, dark buckthorn-honeysuckle-amur maple forest that we still have. I have always liked the comfortable feel and warmth of an "oak savanna"; an area with only 5-50% tree canopy cover. A woodland has 50-100% tree canopy cover.

When property owners clear invasive trees, our woodlands become more open, shady tolerant wildflowers become more common, wildlife may become more visible, and we may even see our neighbors off through the woods. It is my hope that we will someday do similar projects in our City's parks. The trend seems clear to me and I think open woodlands make our properties seem larger and more welcoming. I hope you do, too. For additional information please contact your City Forester at Jim_nayes@mac.com or 612-803-9033.