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Photo: James H. Miller



Photo: James R. Allison, GA DNR



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Photo: John M. Randall, TNC

Oriental Bittersweet

Celastrus orbiculatus



Habit: Deciduous, woody, twining vine.

Leaves: Simple, alternate, rounded, finely toothed, glossy; leaf tips acute or acuminate; 5-13 cm (2-5 in) long; turn yellow in fall.

Stems/bark: Light brown, often with noticeable lenticels; solid white pith; can climb 18 m (60 ft) high in trees and reach 10 cm (4 in) in diameter.

Flowers: Small; greenish yellow; five-petaled; clustered in leaf axils; bloom in May-June.

Fruits/seeds: Outer skin (green in summer and yellow orange in fall) covers a red, fleshy aril, which contains 3-6 seeds; fruits clustered in leaf axils; colorful fruit may persist through the winter.

Habitat: Found in grasslands, open woods, woodland edges, undisturbed forests, roadsides and fence rows; extremely shade-tolerant.

Reproduction: By prolific seed production and spreading underground roots that form new stems.

Similar species: Native American or climbing bittersweet (*Celastrus scandens*) has elliptical rather than rounded leaves; flowers and fruits terminal rather than axillary; greenbriar (*Smilax* spp.) leaves are entire, not toothed and have parallel leaf veins.

Comments: Native to Asia. Oriental bittersweet hybridizes with American bittersweet, making it a genetic threat to the native species; reduce photosynthesis of the plants that they cover and girdle trees; the native bittersweet cannot be cut or transported without a bill of sale or proof of ownership under Michigan law.

Monitoring & rapid response: Monitor open woods and edge habitats in late fall when most native plants have dropped their leaves. Oriental Bittersweet has bright yellow leaves and female plants have persistent showy fruit in leaf axils. Begin control efforts in highest quality areas; cut plants, allow them to resprout and then spray with herbicide. Initiate control efforts before burning or opening up forest canopy as both may stimulate seed bank. In fire adapted communities, prescribed fire may top-kill vines, facilitating foliar herbicide spraying on new growth. Monitor and re-treat as needed. This species is difficult to control—research control options thoroughly.