Sacred Bamboo (*Nandina domestica* Thunb.)

Victor Maddox, Ph.D., Research Associate, Mississippi State University
John D. Byrd, Ph.D., Extension/Research Professor, Mississippi State University
Randy Westbrooks, Ph.D., Invasive Species Specialist, U.S. Geological Survey

Fig. 1. Sacred bamboo producing green fruit in the forest.

Fig. 2. Sacred bamboo grows tri-pinnately compound leaves.

Fig. 3. Mature sacred bamboo berries turn red.

Introduction

Problems Caused

Sacred or heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica* Thunb.) is a broadleaved evergreen shrub native from India to eastern Asia. Sacred bamboo (Berberidaceae) is not a true bamboo (Poaceae). It was introduced into cultivation in 1804 and more recently escaped. It is still commonly used in landscaping with many cultivars sold commercially. It is generally observed as an escape in forests, fence rows, or forest margins, although often cultivated in full sun. Cyanide poisoning has been reported in livestock and dogs feeding on sacred bamboo.

Regulations

Sacred bamboo is commonly used in landscapes and not regulated in the MidSouth.

Description

Vegetative Growth

Sacred bamboo is an erect, evergreen shrub which can reach 10 feet in height. Stems are erect, one to several growing from a clump, and usually unbranched, although new stems formed at the base of the clump may produce a broad colony of stems. Stems reddish at first, maturing light brown in color Leaves are alternate, glossy, smooth, bi- to tri-pinnately compound, and green, sometimes reddish or burgundy. Petiole bases clasp the stem. Leaves are 1 to 3 feet long and wide, each leaflet elliptic-lanceolate and ¾ to 3 inches long. Leaflets are subsessile with entire margins.

Flowering

Flowering occurs from May to July. Flowers are in terminal, or sometimes axillary, panicles 8 to 15 inches long with several hundred perfect Flowers. Flowers are ¼ to ½ inches across and pinkish in bud, maturing to white with yellow anthers. Flowers are fragrant. Petals are variable in number ranging from 2 to 6. Fruiting occurs from September to October and persisting into April. At first fruit are green, but mature to bright red. The fruit is a spherical berry, 0.2 to 0.3 inches in diameter, with two hemispherical seeds. Seeds are viable, but can be slow to germinate.

Dispersal

The form most often seen escaped does not resemble many of the described cultivars and some cultivars have limited fruit production. Seed can be dispersed over longer distances by birds and small animals may also disperse seed.

Spread By

Nandina seed can be dispersed over longer distances by birds and small animals may also disperse seed. Plants sold in the nursery trade can also serve as a means of dispersal.

Habitat

Sacred bamboo is a problem in fence rows, forest, forest margins and open woodlands. In the MidSouth, it is typically found escaped in mesic forest or fence rows as isolated plants or groups of plants. However, it can be found on rather damp sites in deep shade in the MidSouth and can form dense understory stands in Florida. It can tolerate full sun or deep shade and may become weedy in landscapes as well. Seeds may take up to 2 years to germinate under field conditions. Sacred bamboo is hardy at least from zone 6 to 9.

Distribution

United States

Sacred bamboo is native from India to eastern Asia, including China and Japan. In the United States it has escaped at least from Virginia to Florida and Texas.

MidSouth

Currently populations tend to be small and scattered in the MidSouth, but since it is commonly used in landscapes additional spread is likely. It can be weedy in landscapes, although some cultivars apparently lack fruit. Since it has only recently been reported escaping (1964), its invading potential may not be fully realized. Currently, it tends to be naturalized at scattered localities across the MidSouth.

Control Methods

Biological

No biological controls are currently being utilized for *Nandina* control.

Chemical

More research is needed on *Nandina* control, since there are no label recommendations.

Mechanical

Mechanical controls can be used for Nandina control, but tend to be expensive and labor intensive. Plants tend to grow in clumps with shallow roots. Seed however may remain in the soil and germinate long after plants are removed. Thus, removal prior to seed production or planting of cultivars with little or no seed production is recommended

Physical

No physical controls are widely utilized for Nandina control. *Nandina* grows in both shade and full sun habitats.

References

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More Information

The Genus *Nandina* belongs to the Barberry (Berberidaceae) Family. The Genus *Nandina* is not native to the MidSouth or the United States, and only one species is known. Dirr (1998) lists 28 cultivars, although many other cultivars have been recognized internationally. Cultivars include dwarf, white-fruited, variegated, and purple-pigmented forms.

John D. Madsen, Ph.D.
Mississippi State University, Geosystems Research Institute
Box 9652, Mississippi State, MS 39762-9652
Ph. (662)325-2428, jmadsen@gri.msstate.edu
www.gri.msstate.edu