

Stop 363 Adult Tour – Invasive Plants, Warm Temperate House

Modern botanic gardens collect plants from around the world largely for educational purposes or to act as repositories for endangered or threatened species. Yet, many plants are imported for their potential as economic plants, either as garden ornamentals or food crops. In the late 19th century hundreds and hundreds of plants from different continents were introduced into the United States. Unfortunately, one of the potential problems with the introduction of these non-native plants worldwide is that a small fraction of them escape into the wild. For reasons not always understood, a few of these escapees have multiplied so rapidly and are so competitive that they displace native flora. These species are known as invasive exotic plants.

One example is the floating water hyacinth we have growing here in this enclosed pool. Native to the northern neotropics of South America, it is naturally kept in check by predators there. But in the late 1800's, well-meaning people, drawn by the plants lush leaves and lavender flowers, removed it from the Amazon and introduced it commercially as a water garden ornamental. Upon escape, the water hyacinth's ability to adapt has made it a major pest in waterways in warm climates throughout the world. It spreads rapidly by sending off side branches, and in ideal conditions a single plant can cover 500 square meters in one year.

Water hyacinth is not winter hardy in Massachusetts so it poses no threat here. However, in New England, non-native invasive plants include purple loosestrife, Japanese knotweed, Multiflora Rose, and the Norway maple, all of which were introduced well over a hundred years ago as ornamentals and are a continuous problem in New England ecosystems. To learn more about invasive species, the federal government has set up a great web page at www.invasivespecies.gov.