

Japanese Barberry – Invasive Species that Attracts Ticks

You may love that attractive Japanese Barberry in your garden, with its gorgeous fall colors and leaves the deer won't eat. But there are two important reasons not to love it. This non-native plant is invasive, and research has shown that there is a higher density of deer ticks (the ones that cause Lyme Disease) under the bushes.

Japanese Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*) is native to Japan and the eastern part of Asia. It was imported as an ornamental from Russia in 1875 to the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, and was promoted as an alternative to the native barberry, which was susceptible to black stem grain rust. The plant has escaped cultivation and spread north to Nova Scotia, south to North Carolina, and east to Montana.

Japanese Barberry grows 2 -8 feet high in a variety of locations – sun, shade, a variety of soil types, open fields, woodlands, and roadsides. It has an arching stem with spines under the leaf cluster. Its small leaves -green, burgundy, or chartreuse –are oval with smooth edges, in contrast to those of the native species, which have toothed edges. It has small yellow flowers followed by ½ inch red berries which last into winter and provide food for birds, who carry the seeds to new locations.

Japanese Barberry seeds have a 90% germination rate, and can remain dormant for up to 10 years. Any stem that touches the ground can root, and the roots also spread underground, invading natural areas. The sharp spines make the plant deer -resistant, so when deer numbers are high, barberry moves in to replace those plants eaten by the deer.

Surprisingly, although the plant repels deer, it welcomes deer ticks. In recent years scientists have discovered that under the plants there are increased numbers of ticks, and also white -footed mice, crucial to the life cycle of the tick, which have higher levels of Lyme-infected ticks than those found elsewhere. When the barberry is removed, these numbers drop.

So there are two very good reasons not to have Japanese Barberry in your garden. Your first line of defense is not to plant it. If you do have it, it needs to be removed. You can dig out as many roots as possible, or cut the plant back, and bag the stems and roots in heavy duty garbage bags. If the plant returns, it can be mowed or treated with a propane torch. Small shoots can be pulled out. Treatment with glyphosphate (Roundup) is an option, although not my first choice. It is best to remove the plant before autumn when the seeds form.

More information about Japanese Barberry can be found at invasivespeciesinfo.gov