



WASH YOUR BOOTS

— by Cathy Kuntz

You hike. You bike. You garden. You also care deeply about the environment.

But while you work hard to reduce your environmental footprint, you may also be, unintentionally, helping to spread terrestrial invasive species from your home to your Muskoka cottage.

“It’s ironic that it’s often environmentalists who are out enjoying nature who, unknowingly, spread these plants,” says Rebecca Willison, Watershed Planning Technician for the Muskoka Watershed Council.

Invasive species are opportunistic aliens. They adapt quickly to their environment and compete with native species for sunlight, water and space. They thrive in areas such as cleared lots and ditches.

It’s up to us to stop the spread.

“Inspect your equipment, clothing and pets,” says Willison. “You might have plant fragments or seeds in your boots or stuck on your dog.”

Wash your ATV or mountain bike after your ride through a cleared lot in the city so the garlic mustard seeds stuck in your tires stay in the south. Let your equipment dry for at least six hours before driving to the cottage and riding through your neighbour’s trail.

“Moving firewood is also not a good idea,” says Willison. Wood from regulated areas like southern Ontario and the greater Ottawa area can carry the Emerald Ash Borer or the Asian Long-Horned Beetle. Insects and plant diseases put native plants and animals at risk.

Boats need cleaning too

Aquatic invasive species are also a threat. If you trailer your boat from one lake to another, be sure to drain the bilge and motor and wash the hull with hot or pressurized water, or leave it in the sun for five days before relaunching.

“Don’t bring plants from your garden in Toronto to Muskoka,” Willison adds. “That’s how plants like periwinkle, goutweed and giant hogweed got started here.”

Educate yourself. Buy your plants from a nursery that sells native species and non-invasive species. Most local nursery owners are well-informed on the subject.

The tall, golden grass that grows in ditches and sways beautifully in the wind might look perfect in your home garden but don’t stop to dig it up. It could be phragmites, a perennial that may still show up as an ornamental grass in some nurseries. Its new shoots grow rapidly and each plant produces 2,000 seeds annually. It’s Canada’s worst invasive plant and is just waiting for the blade of your lawnmower, the brush of your furry pet or your boots to transport its seeds to wetlands and shorelines.

So, do your part. Stop the spread. Wash your boots. **LS**