

Beware—There’s a Barberry Pirate in our Woods (Help community efforts to eliminate it)

There’s a barberry pirate lurking along the roads in North Central Beach and spreading into the surrounding woodland. This is the invasive shrub *Berberis thunbergii*, commonly called Japanese barberry. For decades this popular shrub with its attractive foliage and bright orange-red berries, was planted in suburban yards, in cemeteries, and around public buildings. Having escaped the borders of planted gardens, it has readily spread across the Midwest and threatens the botanical diversity, wildlife habitats, and scenic beauty of the Great Lakes ecosystem.

Michigan is one of more than twenty states nationwide that have officially designated the plant an “invasive” species. The NCBA Conservation Organization has been monitoring the community’s conservation land and roadsides to ensure that the natural habitat of these areas is not under threat. Measures requiring professional treatment have been taken to eradicate several large thickets along North Perry Ave.

Working together as a community, NCBA members can control the spread of Japanese barberry, limit its damage, and make a significant difference in preserving the natural environment and scenic beauty that make North Central Beach a special place. Much can be done by manually removing barberry plants before they reach shrub size and form thickets requiring professional treatment.



Barberry, a small woody plant, flourishes at the forest’s edge along roadways, driveways, parking areas, and abandoned or seldom-used paths. It thrives in a variety of conditions from full sun to deep shade, and is easily recognized by its thorny branches and small spoon-shaped leaves. It bears small yellow blossoms in spring and red-orange, egg-shaped berries in fall and winter. In Pentwater the plant loses its leaves in winter. Fortunately in NCBA’s sandy soils, the shallow-rooted plants are fairly easy to remove manually.

Why is barberry a problem?

Japanese barberry can quickly wreak ecological havoc, endangering the native plants and shrubs that give natural woodlands their inherent beauty and biological diversity. As the plant spreads, it can quickly crowd

out the native plants and shrubs that draw birds, pollinators (bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, etc.) and other wildlife to our community.

What can cottage owners do to help eliminate it?

- Familiarize yourself with the barberry plant and its character as the seasons change. Periodically inspect your property, especially at the edges of unpaved driveways and parking areas, for young seedlings and runners.
- Manually pull seedlings and young shrubs on your property and the roadside near your cottage. You should be able to lift plants as tall as 18 or 24 inches from NCBA’s loose sandy soil without much difficulty. Make sure to remove the entire root system. If the plant doesn’t come free, try again when the ground is moist. Avoid using shovels and trowels that sever the roots. Wear gloves and protective clothing, and afterwards always check for ticks (which often make their home beneath the thorny branches).
- Immediately place all plant parts (especially berries and roots) in a heavy duty trash bag. Seal bags tightly and dispose of them with residential trash. Unlike other yard or garden waste which must be recycled, Michigan law allows invasive plant parts to be bagged and disposed of in the public landfill.
- Volunteer for a “barberry pull.”
- Alert community leaders of affected areas that should be targeted for community “barberry pulls”, as well as “hot spots” that may need more aggressive, professional treatment.
- When purchasing new plants, choose native trees and shrubs, particularly those that echo the surrounding woods and are compatible with the natural ecology.

