

Rhode Island Invasive Plant Management Act of 2026 – Policy Brief

H7071 (Boylan)

S#### (McKenney)

Summary

The Rhode Island Invasive Plant Management Act of 2026 tackles the challenges posed by specific invasive plant species by broadening the State's existing list of prohibited invasive aquatic plants to incorporate certain invasive terrestrial plants. The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) will take the lead in creating this list, drawing upon a wealth of existing tools, resources, and lists already at their disposal. Currently, Rhode Island stands out as the only New England state and one of just five states nationwide that does not regulate the propagation, import, and sale of harmful invasive terrestrial plants, which is essential for protecting its vital ecosystems. USDA Forest Services identifies invasive plants as one of four key threats facing the nation's forests and grasslands.

Introduction

Invasive plants present substantial risks to natural ecosystems, agriculture, and economic productivity. An invasive plant is a non-native species that spreads rapidly and aggressively in a new environment, often outcompeting local flora. Invasive plants disrupt natural ecosystems, reduce biodiversity, and can even negatively impact agriculture, water resources, and recreational areas. Their ability to thrive outside their native range allows them to dominate landscapes, crowding out native plants and altering habitats that wildlife depend on. In Rhode Island, invasive plants have taken hold, threatening local plant communities and habitats. State agencies, conservation organizations, and private landowners spend hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours annually trying to mitigate the spread of invasive plants.

The Difference Between Native, Nonnative, and Invasive Plants

Native plants are indigenous to a particular region or ecosystem, having evolved in concert with local wildlife, soils, and climatic conditions over hundreds of thousands of years. They are essential components of thriving ecosystems and are critical to the biodiversity of our state. These plants are also essential tools for stormwater management, climate mitigation, and coastal preservation. Despite their enormous value to our state, less than 20% of plants sold through the nursery trade are native species and our region's landscapes are heavily dominated by nonnative plants.

Nonnative plants—also termed exotic, introduced, or ornamental species—are those that have been brought to an area outside their natural range by human activity, either intentionally or accidentally. These are predominately used in ornamental gardening and have also been used historically in forestry and agriculture. Many nonnative plants have cultural or sentimental value and a history of human uses. While nonnative plants do not support our local ecosystem in the same way as native species, most do not cause any harm and do not need to be managed in any particular way.

Invasive plants are a specific subset of nonnative species that not only successfully establish themselves in a region but also spread aggressively, causing environmental degradation, economic loss, and, in some cases, harm to human health. Invasive species diminish biodiversity by supplanting native plants, thereby undermining wildlife habitats and ecosystem resilience. They often alter soil chemistry and hydrology, resulting in lasting ecological change.

Not all nonnative plants are invasive. According to the Non-Native Species Secretariat, only 10-15% of introduced plants have historically become invasive and begun to cause ecological harm. However, these plants require diligent and thoughtful management, including legislative and regulatory efforts. Over several decades, peer reviewed research has consistently shown that anywhere from 60-85% of invasive plants were at some point

intentionally introduced through active sale and planting. This finding was emphasized in current research which took place close by in Massachusetts:

Beaury, E. M., Patrick, M., & Bradley, B. A. (2021). Invaders for sale: The ongoing spread of invasive species by the plant trade industry. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*

To explore more on pathways of introduction as well as noted ecological and economic harm refer to resources and research available through:

Cornell Botanical Gardens (a premier educational and research horticultural institution) <https://cornellbotanicgardens.org/conserve/invasive-species/invasive-plants-faqs>

The Northeast Regional Invasive Species & Climate Change Management Network <https://www.risccnetwork.org/northeast>

Invasive Plant Species in Rhode Island

The Natural History Survey, an independent nonprofit, chairs the Rhode Island Invasive Species Council, a voluntary collaboration among organizations with substantial interests in the prevention, documentation, and management of invasive species in the State. The Council of experts has developed a non-regulatory list of invasive and weedy plants in Rhode Island, current as of 2020, which can be viewed on their website here <https://rinhs.org/species/invasive-species/>. Rhode Island regulates the sale and distribution of invasive aquatic plants but places no restrictions on the sale of invasive terrestrial plants.

The Important Role of Prohibited Plant Lists

According to the National Invasive Species Information Center, preventing the introduction of invasive plants is widely recognized as the most effective and cost-efficient management strategy. Prohibited plant lists are essential regulatory tools. These lists enable government agencies to restrict the importation, sale, cultivation, transport, and distribution of identified high-risk plant species. Prohibited plant lists provide a statutory framework that informs land managers, horticulturalists, nurseries, and the public about regulated species and the rationale for their control.

New Hampshire led the region in 1997 when it implemented a prohibited plant list restricting the sale of plants still commonly sold in Rhode Island today. With an eye to proactively protecting the essential biodiversity of our region, other New England states soon followed suit. Massachusetts created a prohibited plant program in 2006 and currently bans the sale and distribution of more than 140 plant species. Connecticut instituted their program in 2004 and currently regulates more than 100 species with new plants being added as recently as this year. Vermont implemented prohibitions in 2012 and now restricts 39 species and Maine came on board in 2017 and now restricts more than 70 varieties.

It is well past time for Rhode Island to join other New England states in implementing this important approach. Stopping the spread at the source is part of being a good neighbor and working to jointly preserve biodiversity in New England. This is vital for ecosystem health, climate resilience, and economic stability, protecting critical services like clean water, air purification, and pollination. Thriving and biodiverse ecosystems sustain the region's tourism and fishing industries while bolstering natural defenses against climate change and disasters.

Frequently asked questions

What does this mean for people who already have invasive plants in their yard? Prohibited plant lists only restrict propagation, sale and distribution and have no impact on people's existing plantings. However, these lists do offer important public education which has been shown to encourage many property owners to voluntarily replace invasive plantings with more desirable species over time. In fact, some states offer incentive programs to

encourage homeowners to replace invasive plants with native varieties and other states provide “green lists” of recommended substitutions.

How would this list be created? Rhode Island DEM would be charged with creating the list, but resources such as Rhode Island’s existing invasive plant list and prohibited plant lists from neighboring states are available to ease the burden.

How would this list be updated? Typically, the state department charged with managing the prohibited plant list makes additions as new scientific information comes available. These generally take place after periods of public comment.

Will this negatively impact the nursery industry? While on the one hand nurseries who continue to grow and sell invasive plants stand to lose revenue, the system currently favors those businesses which knowingly continue to promote plants shown to cause environmental and economic harm. Prohibited plant lists and corresponding community education level the playing field for the many businesses who voluntarily ceased the sale of invasive plants. Prohibited plant lists typically include phase out periods that enable growers to sell down stock, mitigating economic hardship.

Will this place too much of a burden on state agencies? RI DEM already conducts licensing and inspection of nurseries and should reasonably be able to add this monitoring to those already routine checklists and visits.

Conclusion

Invasive plants represent a persistent threat to the ecological integrity and economic viability of Rhode Island and the nation. The creation, maintenance, and enforcement of prohibited plant lists are vital policy tools for addressing these challenges. Continued legislative support and interagency collaboration are necessary to safeguard biodiversity, promote sustainable land use, and reduce the ongoing costs associated with invasive plant management.