

These Humid Days of Buckthorn
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I unexpectedly lost my steady job this summer. Maybe this has happened to you too. You are the only income in the household to pay all the bills. You are supporting two teenage children. You own a house here in Eden Prairie where the average house price is creeping above \$250,000, though you bought yours some time ago for many thousands less and your taxes seem to be on the rise (again?). You find yourself very healthy and very active, but affordable health insurance is hard to find. And the house you live in is less than two miles from the public school your child attends and the transportation fee is a bit more money than you have to spend on "extras." Has this happened to you -- or something like it? It can be overwhelming.

I'm lucky though. I have buckthorn. I have the shrub to beat all shrubs. The most invasive of all hedges. The plant that is illegal to sell in Minnesota. Buckthorn is a non-native species, introduced to Minnesota in the 1880s as an ornamental shrub. Unfortunately, buckthorn kills native plants that can't compete with it. According to the Minnesota DNR's web site, it "aggressively invades oak forests, savannas, prairies and riparian woods, completely eliminating native plant diversity in the understory over time." The sale, transportation, or movement of this plant is prohibited statewide by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

While I'm no plant expert -- and in fact, I'm not much into gardening, I can tell you that **my** buckthorn has short thorns along the bark, dark green shiny leaves, purplish berries, and has grown to be about 15 feet high. My buckthorn trees have crowded out the other shrubs and numerous lilies and tulips growing beneath it. It's even crowding out the evergreens. In my 75 feet of backyard "woods," I could count about 25 buckthorn trees of 8 feet or more.

See why I'm lucky? I could be swimming in misery over the next source of income, how to manage, and what will come next. But no, I have buckthorn. What a perfect project for these sticky summer days that would otherwise be filled with anxiety. Buckthorn removal. Can you imagine my joy?

The buckthorn-elimination project was exacerbated by another invasive, irritating and aggressive creature -- the mosquito. Somehow it seemed fitting that I should spend this July in long-sleeved shirts and long pants, socks and hiking boots. Doesn't this sound like a blast?

This was serious business. I even had a strategy. I would start by cutting the higher branches down to make the tree more "manageable." Then, I would cut the tree down to a stump. I would finish up by drilling holes in the stump and pouring in concentrated RoundUp, re-treating within two weeks.

The mosquitoes were swarming. The temperature was in the eighties; the dew point was in the seventies. Armed with my saw, I began the elimination process. I cut and sawed. I pulled and tugged. I drilled and poured. It seemed endless. The thorns poked through my gloves as I grabbed the branches. Branches fell with repetitive thrashing. The dog ran in fear. The mosquitoes persisted. The sweat dripped. Every time I thought I had sawed through the last buckthorn tree, I'd see another one behind me. I worked for days. No rain, no rain. Just more heat and humidity. And more buckthorn.

Buckthorn. I don't dare to think I'm through with it. I see that my neighbors have it too. Maybe I'm inspiring.

It's nearly ten o'clock at night right now and the temperature is still in the eighties and the dew point is 73 degrees. My kids are upstairs in their rooms. The dog is sleeping on the cool floor. And I'm ready to consider the next phase of my life.

And I'm still lucky.