

# RUSSIAN OLIVES

Over the past 60 years or so, state and federal government agency personnel and individual citizens planted perhaps millions of Russian olive trees in North Dakota. Evidence of that work is visible in farmstead and field shelterbelts and wildlife and conservation plantings all across the state.

Two years ago, however, Congress passed a law providing several million dollars a year to fund Russian olive and saltcedar *removal* projects in several Western states, including North Dakota. For the last decade, North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists have removed some Russian olives from state wildlife management areas – not the same trees that were laboriously planted in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, but rather scattered rogue olive trees that sprouted randomly where they were not wanted.

The Game and Fish Department is not the only agency that is reevaluating its philosophy on Russian olives. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is also removing these trees from parts of its national wildlife refuges and waterfowl production areas in North Dakota, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service is developing new guidelines to limit areas where Russian olives are planted.

## The Good Olives

Russian olives are native to western Asia and southern Europe. They were introduced in the central and western United States in the late 1800s, and eventually became common for windbreak, shelterbelt and wildlife plantings on the Great Plains where trees did not previously exist.

The Russian olive became popular because it doesn't need a lot of moisture, can withstand extreme cold, is disease resistant, and it grows quickly. In only a few years a Russian olive planting can develop into useful shelter for deer and birds. The long, narrow, silver-green leaves stay on the tree well into winter, which provides greater protection than trees and shrubs that lose their leaves in the fall.

In addition, the yellow-green fruit, which has little resemblance to the familiar green or black olive, has some value to wildlife, even though it is mostly seed and not much edible fruit. Pheasants and sharp-tailed grouse will eat Russian olive fruit, especially in winter when other food sources are harder to find.

Given these characteristics, it's easy to see why Russian olives became a valuable, beneficial component to many North Dakota tree plantings.

## The Bad Olives

If the only Russian olives growing in the United States were the ones planted by people, the federal government and states wouldn't be spending millions of dollars on removal projects. Fifty years ago, the trees hadn't been around long enough for people to recognize how they might influence the countryside outside of the original planting.

As it turned out, these nonnatives are easily established in natural ways as well. Seeds, perhaps carried by birds or mammals that eat the fruit, take root in random places. They are especially adept at sprouting near creeks, rivers and marshes. Once this happens, and these trees make seed, others are likely to sprout nearby.

These random Russian olives are not generally beneficial. In riparian areas they can crowd out native trees like cottonwoods and willows. Around marshes and in other treeless environments, they can serve as perches for avian predators such as raptors, magpies and crows, or cover for ground predators like skunks and foxes. Additional predators that destroy grassland, waterfowl and upland game bird nests can more than offset whatever benefits random trees might provide in a prairie environment.



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*Pheasants and sharp-tailed grouse will loaf in Russian olive trees and sometimes eat the fruit. On the other hand, the random presence of Russian olives in prairie environments can attract predators that associate with trees, which could lead to greater pheasant and sharp-tail nest predation than would otherwise occur.*

In riparian areas, Russian olives can greatly reduce preferred native habitat and disrupt the species mix. They can become so thick they are hard to walk through.

In some states Russian olives are classified as a noxious plant. They don't have that designation yet in North Dakota, but Game and Fish Department biologists stopped including them in wildlife block plantings years ago. Instead, Game and Fish includes native trees and shrubs like silverberry, buffaloberry, chokecherry, Juneberry, green ash, Missouri River willow and Ponderosa pine, depending on the location and purpose.

Game and Fish Department managers first started removing Russian olives on state wildlife management areas in the early 1990s. Then as now, most removal efforts are directed at volunteer isolated trees in grasslands, or invading stands in riparian areas. Young, smaller trees are easier to remove, either mechanically or chemically. Mature Russian olives that are part of designed tree plantings are generally left alone.

Russian olives are a good topic to consider **From Both Sides**. In some places they serve their intended purpose well, in other places they create problems. Even within the conservation profession there is not universal agreement on how or if Russian olives should be planted or removed.

*What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at [ndgf@nd.gov](mailto:ndgf@nd.gov); call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.*

*Planted on purpose as part of field windbreaks and farmstead shelterbelts, Russian olives are well suited for North Dakota's climate and can benefit wildlife.*



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*On state wildlife management areas, isolated Russian olives that sprout in grasslands or near wetlands are candidates for removal.*

*When Russian olive removal is warranted, Game and Fish has special equipment to help with the task. In some cases chemicals are used to kill the tree before it is either taken down or burned.*



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# FROM BOTH SIDES