

### Your Turn: Invasive-plant symposium gets in the weeds, literally



On June 11, 2024, Peter Picone led volunteers in spreading more than one million seeds of native grasses and wildflowers into 15 acres at the Suffield Wildlife Management Area. The seeds were all collected from Connecticut state lands. Picone is on the far left, in the first row. Photo courtesy of Peter Picone.

October 08, 2024 9:04 pm • Last Updated: October 08, 2024 9:08 pm

By **Kathy Connolly, Special to the Times**

Warm weather and above-average rainfall made our 2024 gardens grow but also encouraged invasive plants. Invasives are not just any weeds. They are non-native plants that take advantage of landscape disturbances such as excavation, movement of soil, overpopulation of deer, or the spread of invasive worms. Though the initial disturbances may seem inconsequential, these plants gain a toehold and then quickly change landscapes for the worse. Familiar examples include Japanese knotweed, stiltgrass, and bittersweet.

It's also been a big year for the Connecticut Invasive Plants Working Group, often called by its acronym, CIPWG (pronounced "sip-wig"). This consortium of environmental organizations, university affiliates, individuals, and government agencies promotes awareness of invasive plants, management methods, and native alternatives. (See [CIPWG.UConn.edu](http://CIPWG.UConn.edu))

Among other accomplishments in 2024, CIPWG participants donated 5,300 hours of community service to the cause.

Also, in 2024, the CIPWG network successfully assisted the state's Invasive Plants Council and the state legislature in updating the invasive plants list, which was the first update since 2018.

In addition, UConn Extension added a new outreach specialist for invasive species who will support the CIPWG mission. (Learn more below.)

#### 2024 Invasive Plants Symposium

Now, CIPWG is taking registrations for its biannual symposium at Storrs on Oct. 29 — its 22nd event since 2002. The 2020 and 2022 events were only online, but this year's event is in person.

The conference offers opportunities to network, talk with experts, share experiences, earn CEUs, and obtain valuable resource literature.

The theme is "Real Talk — Making an Impact in Invasive Plant Management."

The keynote speaker is Peter Picone, a wildlife biologist who has tangled with these plants since the early 1990s in his role with the state's Department of Energy and Environment. Picone is a popular speaker at community and professional events and has published papers, nature guides, and YouTube videos on related topics.

His keynote is titled, "For the Love of Plants...To Plant or Not to Plant? A Wildlife Biologist's Perspective."

Picone explains, “We can’t address the needs of wildlife without addressing their habitats. These days that means addressing invasive plants.”

In his official role, Picone manages the state’s wildlife management areas west of the Connecticut River. He provides technical assistance statewide to municipalities and private landowners. He has managed invasive plant removal and habitat restoration on hundreds of acres around the state.

“In the last 35 years, we’ve learned a lot,” says Picone. “I hope to share my experience and show how we can all make a difference in habitat management. It can be as simple as choosing a native tree, shrub, wildflower, or grass for your landscape,” he says. His talk will feature examples of successful restorations from his years as a habitat manager.

### **New Specialist for Public Outreach**

UConn’s Department of Extension welcomed Lauren Kurtz this year as an invasive species outreach specialist. She is a 2023 UConn graduate with a Ph.D in horticulture and plant breeding. She says the most essential part of her role is communicating science-based information about invasive plants to diverse audiences.

Kurtz adds, “I’m passionate about ecological horticulture and environmental education.”

In her new role, Kurtz most often encounters people who want to remove invasive plants. Usually, they want simple answers to complicated questions.

“It’s challenging sometimes to explain the removal timeline. It is often longer than people want to believe.” She adds, “The most challenging aspect of this work is knowing where to focus your efforts.”

She also encounters people who value the invasive plants on their properties and do not agree that they should be removed.

“For instance, some people find Japanese knotweed attractive, and they observe bees on the flowers,” she says. “They conclude that these plants provide as much value as many native plants, and they may be inclined to keep them.”

She says, “My job is to give them research-based information on the issues posed by the plant. Ultimately, however, the choice is theirs.”

Kurtz says that habitat improvement can take years, and one of her goals is to develop a new invasive plant prioritization strategy for landowners. “We hope to help people by defining appropriate milestones,” she says. “I also hope to work with conservation commissions to develop invasive species management plans for whole communities.”

Lauren Kurtz will join extension educator Vickie Wallace, who is also CIPWG’s co-chair, and associate professor Bryan Connolly of Eastern Connecticut State University in a symposium session titled “CIPWG’s Role in Combatting Invasive Plants.”

The symposium is suitable for people from a wide range of backgrounds, including property owners, community volunteers, master gardeners, land care and natural resource professionals, landscape architects, land care professionals, members of conservation organizations, and Town committee members. All interested people are welcome. CEUs are available for a variety of professionals.

If invasive plants are a problem for you or your community, register for this year’s symposium by visiting [CIPWG.UConn.edu](https://www.theday.com/CIPWG).

*Kathy Connolly writes about landscape design and ecology from Old Saybrook. Her website is [www.SpeakingofLandscapes.com](http://www.SpeakingofLandscapes.com).*

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