

Little Hands Take on a Big Job



When Cynthia Katz noticed a non-native weed called black-swallow wort (*Vincetoxicum nigrum*), also known as “dog-strangling vine,” growing along roadsides near her home in New Boston, New Hampshire, she didn’t anticipate that some of the town’s youngest citizens would be her most aggressive volunteers in controlling the weed and educating others on its serious invasive threat to native species.

At New Boston Central School, teacher Nancy Graybill asked Cynthia to give a presentation on seed dispersal to her first-grade students. Cynthia took the opportunity to use the dog-strangling vine as an example of dangerous spreading, invasive weeds.

Through Cynthia’s presentation, students learned how non-native plants can harm native species and are often brought to new places by humans. The class was especially shocked to hear that plants like the dog-strangling vine can be bad for birds, insects and other animals that depend on native plants for survival.

Challenge:

The first-graders in Ms. Graybill’s class were particularly concerned to learn that dog-strangling vine could possibly be poisonous to Monarch Butterfly larvae, which the students had raised in their classroom. Monarchs can confuse dog-strangling vine with native milkweed and lay their eggs on its leaves, where newly hatched larvae generally die.



Elementary students pull invasive weeds from school grounds.



Dog-strangling vine has rapidly spread throughout New Hampshire.

This fact, and the weed’s “dog-strangling” nickname, sparked kids’ interest. A number of little hands shot up as the children reported they’d seen the plant around their houses. Two boys even volunteered to show the class what turned out to be a massive patch of the weed on grounds behind the school.

Solution:

The next day, Ms. Graybill’s class got busy. Armed with school-issued safety scissors and large garbage bags, they hiked out to the infested area and removed a number of unopened seed pods, clearing as many of the vines as possible. Subsequently, the students taught other first-grade classes about the problem, and they, too, went to work removing the invasive weed wherever possible.

Result:

Even a six-year-old child can learn to recognize an invasive plant species and demonstrate a desire to protect the environment. The work of cutting and hand-pulling invasive patches of dog-strangling vine served as a positive and exhilarating activity for the children, who felt pride knowing they had made a difference in their own community’s native ecosystem. After their battle with the dog-strangling vine, students made pictures of the plant to take home to parents, along with a helpful information sheet.

As Cynthia Katz points out, the value of educating young people on ways to protect the unique biodiversity surrounding their homes and schools is immeasurable.



Learn More:

Cynthia Katz
Plants4NH@aol.com
www.plants4NH.com

NIWAW Information:

Gina Ramos, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
(202) 452-5084
gina_ramos@blm.gov

Lee Van Wychen, Ph.D.
National and Regional Weed Science Societies
(202) 408-5388
lee.vanwychen@weedsocieties.org

To learn from other success stories, visit www.weedcenter.org and www.nawma.org
For more weeds information, visit www.blm.gov