

Youth Volunteer Program Guide

Cultivating a Community of Forest Stewards
through Invasive Plant Workdays



2022



Produced as a collaboration between
VT Dept. Forests, Parks & Recreation
and Winooski Valley Park District



Guidance on Running a Program

It is easy to get lost in the details. Hopefully, the [step by step checklists](#) provide structure to that process. Here is general guidance that our staff have learned from experience, and we hope can prove useful as you navigate setting up a successful program.

HAVE A CLEAR, HOPEFUL MESSAGE

- The first step towards creating a conservation mindset is developing an appreciation of nature and the outdoors. Help participants develop that appreciation by giving them a positive outdoor experience!
- The issue of invasive plants can quickly become overwhelming and daunting. Sharing a hopeful message will help participants feel that they have made a real difference and that they are empowered to do more.
- Help participants recognize the impact they are making by reminding them to take a look around after they're done working – can they see a difference? Make sure to emphasize what a big, positive change they made by removing invasive plants. Consider taking before and after pictures.
- Encourage participants to help “spread the word, not the plant” by telling other people about what they learned at your program.

SET PARTICIPANTS UP FOR SUCCESS

- Work in small subgroups.
 - 10 – 12 young people per subgroup ensures each person gets individual attention from their subgroup leaders.
 - Each group should have a representative from or volunteering for your organization (the invasive plant “expert”) and a representative from the school (the chaperone) as their group leaders.
- Create a [comfortable learning environment](#).
 - People are able to learn better when they are comfortable and their basic needs are met. Make sure to provide access to water and food

(snack/lunch breaks), and, when possible, restrooms and a place to gather out of the elements.

- Make it personal! Have everyone wear a name tag so participants can be addressed by name. Come up with a fun subgroup name to encourage team building and group spirit.
- Create a safe work environment (see safety tips in “Facilitating a successful invasive plant removal session” below).
- Have a good flow: mix up activities, take breaks, don’t do any one thing for too long.
 - Keep materials and activities engaging and age appropriate.
 - Teach to the level of your audience.
 - Minimize the amount of time you spend talking. Keep your lesson engaging by asking questions, demonstrating with visual aids/ props, and using relatable examples and analogies.

FACILITATING A SUCCESSFUL INVASIVE PLANT WORKDAY

- Fostering relationships with partner organizations allows them to build invasive plant events into their workflow, which also helps ensure there’s always enough leaders because people will want to take part.
- Having a [good worksite](#) with invasive plants of various sizes will help keep young people engaged.
- [Teach plant identification](#).
 - Teach ID in small subgroups.
 - Participants optimally can learn 2-3 species at a time.
 - One way to teach ID is to show participants plant samples and guide them into noticing important ID characteristics.

Guidance, cont.



Carrying a weed wrench like this minimizes the risk of hitting people with the tool.



Carrying loppers like this reduces risk of poking or cutting something accidentally.

- Stress the importance of pulling up the right plant. You don't want them to accidentally pull the species that they're trying to protect.
- Encourage participants to ask as many ID questions as they need to. Reassure them that they are not expected to be "experts" yet, and the best way to learn is to ask questions.
- If the invasive plants you're working with have flowers or berries, remind participants that not all individual plants will have those features so it's still important to learn the other, less obvious, ID characteristics.
- Have participants find an example of each invasive plant species you'll be working with before they begin pulling.
- Invasive plant "experts" should pay attention to what participants pull to make sure they have their ID down. If a participant makes a mistake, help them see the difference between what they pulled and the target invasive plants.
- Teach tool use & safety.
 - Do not hand out the tools until participants can successfully ID target invasive plants.
 - Go over how to safely use and transport tools before passing them out to participants.
 - Remember, loppers are sharp, wrenches are heavy and awkward to carry, and the jaws of wrenches can result in injury. See images to the left for how to properly carry tools.

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- Demonstrate the proper use of each tool and/or removal technique that will be relevant for the work period.
 - Emphasize the importance of removing all roots so the invasive plant doesn't grow back.
 - If using loppers, remind participants that loppers are for cutting low branches to make it easier to use other tools like the weed wrench. They aren't for cutting the invasive plant down to the ground, and that they will still need to remove the roots.
 - Before heading to the worksites, remind participants to keep track of their tools and gloves. Pick a designated, easy-to-recognize spot (on the trail, next to a big tree) to put down tools when they're not being used so they are easy to find and share.
 - Demonstrate disposal techniques and teach participants why they're using that method (e.g. hanging a woody shrub upside down ensures the roots dry out and die and allows it to decompose in the same area it was removed, thus returning the nutrients to the soil).
 - Keep participants engaged.
 - Work periods should be no longer than 2 hours. 1.5 hours seems to be ideal. For longer days, split the work into two periods separated by lunch.
 - [Assign a position/job to each participant](#) to help them focus. Participants can rotate through jobs throughout the work period.
 - Remind participants that they will need to work together to get the bigger/tougher invasive plants out of the ground, and that teamwork and communication are important.

Guidance, cont.

- Provide at least 1 break where everyone stops working and has some water/snack. Playing a quick game during this time can be a good way to refocus the subgroup if needed.
- Picking an appropriate worksite and working with appropriate invasive plants will go a long way to keep participants engaged.
- Consider incorporating a [tally of invasive plants pulled](#) as a motivator for participants.
 - For participants about 11 years and younger, have each group track how many invasive plants they are pulling. At the end of the day, add the subgroups' totals together to see how many invasive plants the larger group has pulled as a whole.
 - For participants about 12 years and older, a friendly competition between subgroups can be a great motivator! Have each group tally how many invasive plants they remove by wrench and by hand. At the end of the day, announce the subgroup that pulled the most invasive plants and have a prize for those participants.
 - Make sure participants understand that in order to count an invasive plant as removed, they must get all the roots.
- Keep participants safe.
 - Before allowing participants to use the tools, drive home the importance of safe tool use.
 - For large groups, go over tool safety twice, once all together and once in subgroups, to ensure all participants hear the important information.
 - Before beginning removal efforts make sure to:
 - Point out any hazards at the worksite, such as poison ivy, stinging nettles, or barbed wire.

- Clearly define the boundaries of the worksite and emphasize the importance of staying together as a subgroup.
- Cover general safety topics including ticks, poison ivy, staying hydrated, etc.
- During the work period, chaperones and invasive plant “experts” are responsible for the safety of the younger participants.
- At the end of the day, remind everyone to do a tick check.

INVASIVE PLANT EDUCATION

- Major concepts to convey about invasive plants include:
 - They did not evolve in the places you’re finding them, but were brought there (usually by humans, either accidentally or for ornamental or cultural uses).
 - They lack predators, competitors, and diseases in their new environments and so are able to thrive.
 - They harm things we value, such as the environment, the economy, or human health.
 - Check out [Other Resources](#) and the [Appendices](#) for more ideas.
- Keep it engaging: Keeping an outdoor lesson engaging could be a treatise of its own. Here are some specific things we’ve found that work well to keep middle school-aged volunteers engaged in an invasive plant program:
 - Before the program, talk with group leaders about what participants are learning so you can relate your lesson to their other experiences.
 - When discussing tool safety, ask subgroup leaders to demonstrate what not to do before having young participants use tools.
 - Assign participants jobs and switch them throughout the day.
 - Work in short periods punctuated by snacks and/or activities.

Guidance, cont.

- Have samples of the invasive plants on hand while teaching ID so participants can see the features you're describing.
 - Consider doing leaf rubbings or drawings and labelling the pertinent characteristics.
- Try having an activity that takes place throughout the day and culminates at the end during the final discussions.
 - We've done this before by giving vocabulary words to each group. They discuss the word throughout the day and present the word to everyone else at the end of the program.
- Use score cards for teams to track invasive plants removed (useful for program engagement, for grant reporting, and for invasive plant management data).
- Save the educational component until after the 1st work period when possible.
 - Once participants have seen the work and invasive plants first hand, they will be more comfortable and therefore more likely to participate in discussions.
 - Also, working first will allow them to get out some of their energy before they are asked to engage on a potentially new – and certainly challenging – topic.
- Lessons usually last between 10 and 30 minutes, depending on the participants' engagement.
- Ask participants what they know about invasive plants. Have they ever noticed any of these plants before? If so, ask what kind of setting it was in (yard, planting, woods, etc.). Can they think of a connection between where they've seen these plants and how these plants tend to spread?

INCORPORATING SUPPORTING ACTIVITIES

- Educational activities and games can be a fun way to reinforce the concepts taught in the more formal educational portion of the program.
- Access our library of [invasive plant lesson plans and activities](#), found on VTinvasives.org.

INCORPORATING RESTORATION PLANTINGS

- Restoration plantings can be a fun, informative, and useful addition to an invasive plant workday or program, when time and resources allow.
- If you include restoration planting, consider also:
 - Teaching about why you're doing restoration work (to give locally-evolved species a head start to recolonize a site, to help erosion control, etc.).
 - Making a big deal about the planting since some young people have never planted anything.
 - Ideally, have at least one plant for every two young people.
 - Bringing a supply of locally evolved species to plant. You can take cuttings with participants if the timing is right, or buy starts if the budget allows.

You Can Make A Difference!

VTinvasives.org



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