

# Vermont Invasive Exotic Plant Fact Sheet

## Common Buckthorn and Glossy Buckthorn

*Rhamnus cathartica* and *Rhamnus frangula*

Buckthorn Family

Vermont Class B Noxious Weed

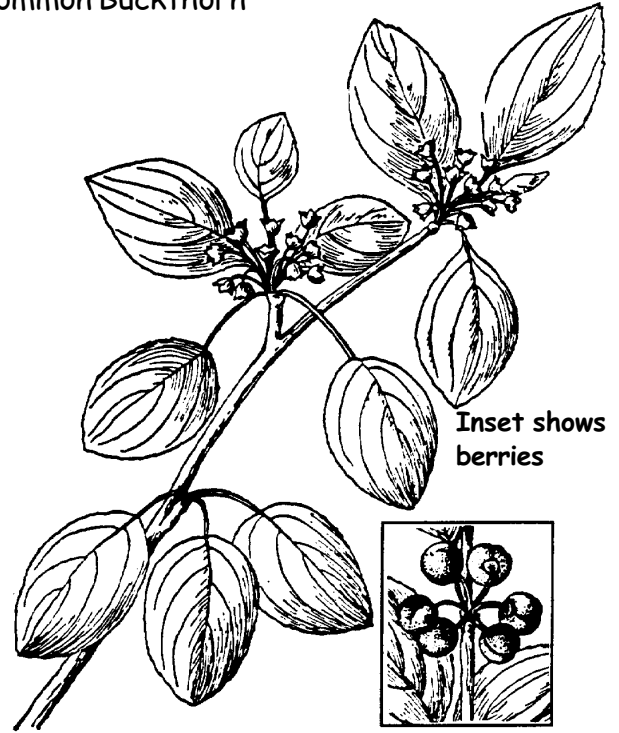
**Description:** **Common buckthorn** is a deciduous shrub or small tree that reaches up to 20 feet (6 meters) high. It has smooth, dull green, minutely toothed, oblong leaves, about 1 to 2.5 inches (2.5-6 cm) long, that are opposite or nearly so on the stem. The leaves have three or four pairs of veins which curve upward toward the tip. Fragrant flowers with 4 greenish-yellow petals, are borne in umbrella-shaped clusters (umbels) among the leaves. The fruit is small, round, and black and contains 3 to 4 seeds. The bark is grey-black, and the twigs have prominent raised patches (lenticels) and may be tipped with sharp thorns. Common buckthorn leaves persist on the plant well into fall as does much of the fruit.

**Glossy buckthorn** can reach up to 23 feet (7 meters) high. It has thin, alternate, glossy leaves, 1 to 3 inches (2.5-7.5 cm) long, which are oblong to elliptical, have more than 5 pairs of veins, and have smooth or wavy margins. Leaves are smooth on the top surface but slightly hairy below. The flowers, yellowish-green with 5 petals, are borne in umbels. The fruit, red when immature and black when ripe, contains 2 to 3 seeds and falls off the plant after ripening. The brown-green bark has elongated lenticels. Leaves persist late into fall.

**Habitat:** **Common buckthorn** occurs in a variety of habitats, including pastures, exposed rocky sites, the understory of open oak, beech, and ash woods, woodland borders and wet areas. It prefers neutral or alkaline soils. It does not grow as well in dense shade.

**Glossy buckthorn** (sometimes called European buckthorn) prefers wetter, less shaded habitats and more acidic soils than common buckthorn. It can invade similar habitats, but more commonly invades wet areas similar to its native habitat, such as wet prairies, sedge meadows, marshes, calcareous fens, sphagnum bogs and tamarack swamps.

Common Buckthorn



Glossy Buckthorn



(Illustrations courtesy of the New York Botanical Garden, from the "New Britton and Brown Illustrated Flora of the United States and Adjacent Canada".)

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**Threats:** Common and glossy buckthorn readily invade natural areas, establishing dense, even-aged thickets which crowd or shade out native plants. Both buckthorns produce fruits that are readily eaten, and thus spread by wildlife.

**Distribution:** Common and glossy buckthorn are native to Eurasia. In North America, common buckthorn has naturalized from Nova Scotia to Saskatchewan, south to Missouri and east to Virginia. Glossy buckthorn has naturalized from Nova Scotia to Manitoba, south to Minnesota, Illinois, New Jersey and Tennessee. In Vermont both exotic buckthorns are widespread in the Champlain Valley, the Taconic Foothills, and in the Connecticut River Valley. They are spreading into the Vermont Piedmont region and up the Winooski, Lamoille and Connecticut river valleys. Care should be taken not to confuse the 2 exotic buckthorns with our native alder-leaved buckthorn, a low shrub of alkaline wetlands.

**Control:** Buckthorns can be controlled by a number of methods. However, repeated treatments are needed as buckthorns are able to resprout. The removal of adult plants may enable new seeds to sprout by increasing light availability. Seedlings and small plants can be pulled up. Repeated cutting or mowing will reduce plant strength and eventually kill the plant. Mowing can also be used to prevent seedlings from becoming established in open areas. Girdling stems along with clipping resprouted growth is effective, as it slowly starves the trees to death with minimal disruption to soils and sensitive wetlands. Combining herbicide use with cutting can also be effective. Stems should be cut after leaf out and again in fall. Repeated burning will remove the above ground portion of the plant, but the below ground part will resprout. In some cases, fire can encourage buckthorn infestation.

### References:

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- Heidorn, R. 1990. *Vegetation Management Guideline: Exotic buckthorns*. 1(5) Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.



For more information about Vermont's invasive exotic plant species or if you would like to know how you can help, please contact:

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