

Japanese Stiltgrass

Microstegium vimineum

Grass Family (Poaceae)



What does it look like? Japanese stiltgrass, native to Asia, is a lime-green grass, 24 in. to 40 in. tall. This shade-tolerant annual is most easily recognized by its leaves, which are distinctly tapered at both ends and about 2 in. to 3 in. long. The flower clusters occur at the tip of long stalks. After the plant develops a slight purplish tinge in the fall, identification becomes somewhat easier. Stiltgrass grows in tight monotypic stands.

What habitats are threatened by this plant? Stiltgrass occupies various areas such as riverbanks, floodplains, swamps, woodland thickets and roadsides. It prefers moist, shady areas; therefore it is particularly common in wooded areas near streams and wetlands. Stiltgrass spreads rapidly through disturbed areas, replacing herbaceous ground vegetation within 3 to 5 years if not removed. Spread in areas with no disturbance is slow and unlikely.

How does this plant spread? Stiltgrass germinates in June, flowers in late August and produces seed from late September to early November. Under optimum conditions, one plant can produce up to 1,000 seeds per plant! There are no obvious mechanisms of dispersal such as hooks or barbs, which makes the rapid expansion of stiltgrass not well understood. Once established, it would take seven years to exhaust the seed bank.

Where is this plant found in the United States? Subsequent to its 1919 collection in Tennessee, Japanese stiltgrass has spread northward. By 1960 it reached Ohio and Pennsylvania and had moved eastward to all the coastal states from Florida to New Jersey. More recently, stiltgrass has been found along the Hudson River in New York and in sparse populations throughout Connecticut.

How can it be controlled? Pulling by hand is effective if it is thorough and timed correctly. Pulling before mid-September reduces unintentional spread of the current year's seeds. However, pulling before early July allows germination of new plants from the seed bank, which will mature during the remaining season and produce seed. August and early September are the best times to hand-pull to prevent seed set.

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