



Spreading the Word about CIPWG: History of the Connecticut Invasive Plant Working Group



The Connecticut Invasive Plant Working Group (CIPWG) began on March 20, 1997 when 30 people attended a meeting at the Tolland County Agricultural Center. Convened by Leslie J. Mehrhoff of the (then) CT Dept. of Environmental Protection and Donna Ellis of the University of Connecticut, the goal was to bring together, and then disseminate knowledge about the presence, abundance, and management of non-native invasive plants. As it was then, CIPWG today remains an ad-hoc organization, represented by federal, state, and town agency staff, non-profit conservation groups, researchers, green industry representatives, educators, master gardeners, community members, and interested citizens.

The mission statement of the Connecticut Invasive Plant Working Group is:

- To gather and convey information on the presence, distribution, ecological impacts, and management of invasive species;
- To promote uses of native or non-invasive ornamental alternatives throughout Connecticut, and;
- To work cooperatively with researchers, conservation organizations, government agencies, green industries, and the general public to identify and manage invasive species pro-actively and effectively. **(Adopted November 1, 1999)**

Under the leadership of Les Mehrhoff, CIPWG members led the way in developing scientific criteria on what constitutes an invasive plant and helped create the formal list of invasive plants for the state of Connecticut, adopted by the State Legislature in 2003. These activities coincided with the appointment of a 9-member, statewide Connecticut Invasive Plants Council, organized by the legislature. While CIPWG is not represented on the Council, CIPWG activities are included in the council's Annual Reports, and council members have expressed appreciation for the educational outreach conducted for many years by the CIPWG membership.

CIPWG's educational outreach takes many forms. The CIPWG web site (<http://cipwg.uconn.edu>) has been an effective way to promote awareness of invasive plants, their identification, ecological (and sometimes public health) concerns and how to implement best management practices through its Invasive Plant Management Guide. Some CIPWG members are available to give talks. Additionally, CIPWG members promote awareness of invasive plants at numerous conferences, training workshops, and other educational events throughout the region.

CIPWG is represented at the annual Connecticut Flower and Garden Show, with an educational booth in February each year. Many dedicated volunteers meet and greet the plant-loving public at the flower show to provide information on all manner of invasive issues. And, CIPWG learns about up-and-coming issues and concerns.

Over the years, CIPWG has partnered with other groups to promote invasive plant education and action beginning with being an active partner in regional efforts, such as the Invasive Plant Atlas of New England and the New England Invasive Plant Group. Local volunteer efforts are advertised and promoted to members via the CIPWG list serve, and website postings. CIPWG members have served as leaders for statewide efforts on a variety of invasive plants, including purple loosestrife, phragmites, Japanese stiltgrass, mile-a-minute vine, Japanese knotweed and more. CIPWG remains very active in the state, convening small informational gatherings twice per year.

Since 2002, CIPWG has hosted biennial invasive plant symposia. Previous symposia have attracted up to 500 attendees. CIPWG's news and events list serve has over 850 members. The CIPWG website provides information on invasive plant topics that include identification, management, the Connecticut list of invasive plants, photos of invasives, invasive plant alternatives, resources, legislative updates, and much more.

The CIPWG Symposia, beginning in 2002 are described below:

- 2002** *Invasive Plants in Public Landscapes: Meeting the Challenge*
- CT DEEP Wildlife Conservation Education Center, Sessions Woods, Burlington, CT

- 2004** *The Silent Invaders: The Identification and Management of Invasive Plants*
- University of Connecticut, Lewis B. Rome Commons, Storrs, CT

- 2006** *Working Together for the Landscape of Tomorrow*
- Mountainside Resort, Wallingford, CT

- 2008** *Cherish Our Natural Heritage: Managing Invasives to Promote Native Diversity*
- UConn, Lewis B. Rome Commons, Storrs, CT

- 2010** *Challenges and Successes: Working Cooperatively to Manage Invasive Plants*
- UConn, Lewis B. Rome Commons, Storrs, CT

- 2012** *Getting Real About Invasive Plants: Prioritize, Strategize, Mobilize*
- UConn, Lewis B. Rome Commons, Storrs, CT

- 2014** *Invasive Plants 2014: Where Are We Now?*
- UConn, Student Union, Storrs, CT

- 2016** *Invasive Plants in Our Changing World: Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future*
- UConn, Student Union, Storrs, CT

- 2018** *Invasive Plants in Uncertain Times: Achieving More with Less*
- UConn, Student Union, Storrs, CT

- 2020** *Realistic Solutions to Managing Invasive Plants* - **Online** Webcast

- 2022** *Strategies for Managing Invasive Plants: Assess, Remove, Replace, and Restore* - **Online**

In December 2010, CIPWG leader, teacher and friend to all, Les Mehrhoff, passed away. His unsurpassed enthusiasm for the natural world remains with all who knew him, and CIPWG honors his memory by presenting the Leslie J. Mehrhoff Award to a deserving recipient at the biennial symposia. The first-ever Mehrhoff Award was given to Susan Parr in 2012 for her longtime involvement providing education about plants and invasives through CIPWG and the Federated Garden Clubs of Connecticut. In 2014, Kathleen Nelson received the award for her extensive work with Mile-a-minute Vine, including inventory, control and public education. The 2016 awardee was Donna Ellis recognized for her vision and leadership. In 2018, Mark Brand received the award with recognition of his research on sterile cultivars of invasive plants. In 2020, Charlotte Pyle was recognized for her long-term involvement in CIPWG including native alternatives work.

CIPWG members and symposia attendees represent a broad cross-section of people involved in the natural world. As long as invasive plants threaten our native diversity, CIPWG will be there to educate and participate.