Oriental bittersweet - Celastrus orbiculatus

Identification
Oriental bittersweet is a deciduous, climbing, woody vine that can grow to lengths of 60 feet. Vines can grow to 4 inches in diameter and are gray to olive in color with whitish-gray, raised lenticels. The alternate, elliptical leaves are variable in shape, bluntly toothed, and light green in color, turning yellow in fall. Small, inconspicuous, axillary flowers give way to round green fruit which ripen and split to reveal showy scarlet berries that persist into winter. It closely resembles American bittersweet (Celastrus scandens) but can be distinguished from it because American bittersweet has flowers and fruits in terminals rather than axillary along the stem.

Diagnostic Characteristics

Habitat
Oriental bittersweet can be dispersed widely and quickly due to the berries being eaten and spread by birds. It can invade a variety of habitats including open and young forests, meadows, glades, savannas, roadsides, fencerows, old home sites, and other disturbed areas. It is generally found in areas of hardwood forests but has been reported in coniferous forests as well. Infestations generally start along the edge of woods and spreads into the interior. Oriental bittersweet can tolerate wet to very dry soil conditions. In Southern Illinois, it is commonly found along ridgetops that has had some type of disturbance previously. However, Oriental bittersweet is tolerant of shaded conditions and can invade relatively undisturbed forests.

Impacts
Prolific vine growth allows Oriental bittersweet to encircle trees and girdle them. It also can completely cover other vegetation and shade, out-compete and kill even large trees. The added weight to the trees increases susceptibility to ice storms and wind damage. Oriental bittersweet can shade and restrict growth of native understory species, shrubs, tree seedlings, and some native vines. It has also been shown to hybridize with American bittersweet, potentially leading to a loss of genetic identity.