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The tale of the moth and nasty plant

Dog-strangling vine has no native enemies, so a weapon was imported

A vine that crowds out and basically strangles other vegetation has been watched by Naomi Cappuccino over the past 15 years as it has spread across Ottawa and other parts of Ontario.



RICHARD CASAGRANDE

A caterpillar of the moth *Hypena opulenta* feeds on the invasive dog-strangling vine.

Cappuccino, an associate professor in Carleton University's biology department, says the invasive species known as dog-strangling vine first caught her attention when she started seeing it on the school campus.

"Just a few patches here or there," Cappuccino recalls. At the time, she thought it was "a really cool plant. It looks like it's in the milkweed family; it's got these pods with fluffy seeds."

Dog-strangling vine is now all over Carleton's campus and can be spotted in the Fletcher Wildlife Garden, Brewer Park and much of the Greenbelt, Cappuccino said.

"It's just amazing ... how much it's overtaken the green spaces in Ottawa," she said. "It's marched across them."

But Cappuccino and a team of Canadian and international researchers think they've found something to fight the vine. Their weapon of choice? The *Hypena opulenta* moth.

The vine is believed to have come to North America from Ukraine in the 1800s, so Cappuccino's colleagues went looking for insects on the plants there. They found caterpillars feeding on the vine.

"Over in Europe, (dog-strangling vine is) a rare species," Cappuccino said. "It's really hard to find it because it has herbivores that keep the populations of the plant in check. Here, the plant has no natural enemies. It just goes crazy."

After years of testing, to make sure the caterpillars wouldn't eat other species of plants in North America, Cappuccino's team received permission to release the moth in Canada in 2013. This summer Cappuccino has been monitoring a release of hundreds of caterpillars onto the plants at the Experimental Farm and, so far, the results are promising.

The caterpillars have chewed on the plant's leaves, tips, flowers and seed pods. Overall, they seem to have caused the plants to turn yellow, Cappuccino said. "It has a big impact for a little herbivore," she said, adding that the caterpillars have since turned into moths and laid eggs. She's now checking every day for the next generation of fighters to hatch.

A few more small-scale releases are expected.

For any gardeners excited about the idea of taming the vine on their property, Cappuccino said she understands.

"It's really bad. If you get it on your property, you can't get rid of it, so I think a lot of property owners are going to be really happy if this pans out," she said.



She said the moths won't totally eradicate the vine, because little patches will still pop up.

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