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Researchers investigate invasive plants

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Project BrownDown

Katie Spellman points to the leaves of bird vetch, an invasive plant, near the ski hut on Saturday at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Spellman is coordinator for Project BrownDown, which is studying the adaptability of native and invasive species.



Robin Wood rwood@newsminer.com

FAIRBANKS — Citizen scientists gathered at the University of Alaska Fairbanks ski hut Saturday to learn about invasive weeds, compare them to their native counterparts and practice charting observed changes.

It was part of Project BrownDown, a twist on the term “green down,” which refers to browning of leaves as they lose chlorophyll. Project BrownDown’s purpose is to determine if invasive plants take advantage of extended growing seasons better than native plants.

Since record keeping, “there’s been a 45 percent increase in days above freezing,” Project Coordinator Katie Spellman said. Researchers want to know what plant species the increased growing season benefits the most.

The project solicits citizens to monitor one invasive and one natural plant from the same family, record leaf browning and fruit or flower production and return their data to be analyzed.

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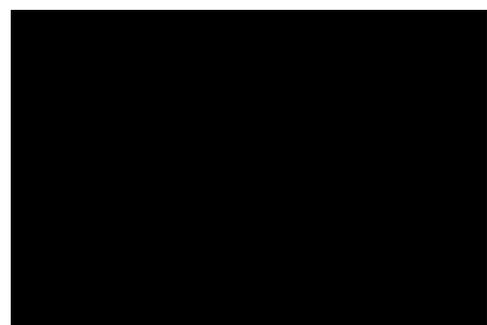
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The project has grown state-wide with observers in Anchorage, Dillingham, Nome, Coldfoot and Ketchikan.

The day started with Spellman explaining the qualifications necessary to be labeled an invasive species to a group of 15 participants. Invasive plants must have been introduced by humans, have little natural competition and disperse rapidly.

To illustrate the hardiness of some invasive species Spellman held up a photo of chokecherry trees with complete foliage among completely bare birch trees.

Spellman recommended comparing the invasive chokecherry, also called European bird cherry, with Alaska wild rose — they're both from the rose family. Hands-on instruction was then given for recording plant phenology — which roughly means changing life events. This includes the number and color of leaves that are furled or unfurled, as well as number of buds, flowers and fruits and their various stages.

Brennan Mackinnan, an intern for the project, said "it's plausible" invasive species will do better with longer growing seasons than native species. "We can't know without the evidence, that's why we're here," the 14-year-old said.

Pat Chambers has taken a class on invasive weeds and thought BrownDown would be a good opportunity to introduce her son, Michael, to research.

"We live here, we love this place — want to see if invasives are harming the ecosystem," Pat Chambers said.

For more information or to participate visit www.sites.google.com/a/alaska.edu/

[projectbrowndown/home](#).

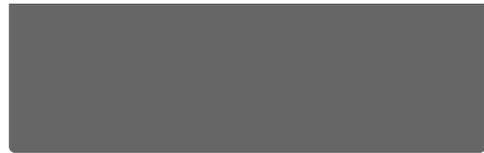
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