January 29, 2026

Dear Chair Bennett, First Vice Chair Phillips, Second Vice Chair Carson, and Members of the House Environment Natural Resources Committee,

I am writing to provide you with my comments regarding House Bill No. H7071 to amend Chapter 2-15 of the General Laws entitled "Protection of Trees and Plants Generally", such that it imparts a prohibition on importation of terrestrial invasive plants.

I fully support H 7071 and urge you to vote in favor of it.

Unfortunately, I was not aware of the hearing on this legislation until I saw the respective article in EcoRI News on January 27th, therefore, I did not have the opportunity to provide you with in-person testimony. However, I would like to use this opportunity to provide you with my comments.

We need to not only prohibit the importation, transportation, disbursement, sale, purchase, or possession of any species of non-native (exotic) invasive plants, **but ALL species of non-native plants!**

I also agree fully with the comment by Representative Knight - "If we're doing this for maximum effectiveness on the ground, we would fund a small PSA program and probably fund a half FTE for random spot inspections and the word would get out".

Whether we think we can't afford to do something about this here in RI, we must!

Now let me convey why we need this legislation and why we can no longer afford to wait for such legislation to be enacted.

Banning invasive plants and the planting of native keystone species of plants – those which support the most caterpillars and animal pollinators (including bees – especially native bees, moths, beetles, butterflies, and other species) - is needed to halt the ongoing insect apocalypse and associated massive decline of birds. We can't continue to wait to address this issue here in Rhode Island.

So, what's wrong with non-native plants?
According to nationally renowned American entomologist, ecologist, and University of Delaware professor Doctor Douglass Tallamy, "When we bring in non-native plants, our native insects, in general, are not able to use them. Invasive plants are typically detractors – plants that degrade food webs. Examples are Callery pear, Bradford pear, Privet, Burning bush, etc. Not only do they not pass on their energy, but they escape and they biologically pollute the ecosystems around us. When they become invasive like this, they push out the

contributing native plants, those which contribute energy to local food webs, and thus a net loss of energy from the local food web."

"One of the main reasons why our natural areas are not doing a good job of supporting insects is that nearly everywhere they are invaded by plants from other continents, mainly from Asia here in the Northeast, many of which are invasive plants. Non-native plants do not support insect populations, instead they destroy insect populations by displacing the native plant species on which insects depend!"

"We have introduced 3,300 species of non-native plants into this country from other continents which are now naturalized or invasive in our natural areas."

"So, what happens to caterpillars when non-native plants replace natives? The result is a significant reduction in the number of species of caterpillars, a significant reduction in the abundance of caterpillars, and a significant reduction in the biomass of caterpillars, which is equivalent to a significant reduction in the amount of energy that is being provided. So, if you think of caterpillars as bird food, which is primarily what they are, that supply of food gets significantly reduced and it is a major reason for the significant decline of breeding bird species."

"It's not just invasive plants that are destroying insect food webs, which they are, it is also our general usage of non-native plants for landscaping purposes. 83% of our ornamental plants are non-native, which means that 83% of the plants currently used for landscaping are either non-contributors – non-supporters of caterpillars – or detractors - plants that degrade food webs. So, they're taking up space that could otherwise be supporting viable food webs."

So, unfortunately, while intending to or not, we are "winning our war against insects" leading to what is now the "insect apocalypse". "What does this mean for the rest of life on earth if we continue to fail to address this issue?"

"Fifty percent of midwestern native bee species have disappeared from their historic ranges in the last century. Four bumblebee species have declined by 96% in the last 20 years; so not extinct but functionally extinct – no longer common enough to be performing their roles in their ecosystems. Three bumblebee species may already be extinct. Twenty-five percent of our bumblebee species are at risk of extinction."

"As of 2014, invertebrate abundance – mostly insects – had declined by 45% globally since 1974. However, the most recent report indicates that we have lost nearly 75% of our global insect population."

This is readily apparent. For example, years ago on summer nights when you were driving along your windshield you would often get coated with dead insects and you would see many insects swarming around streetlights. THIS DOES NOT HAPPEN ANYMORE!!!

‘As insects decline, so do the birds that require them. Four-hundred-thirty-two North American bird species are now threatened with extinction, according to the State of the Birds Report. The trajectory of their population decline is so steep that it is a signal of their impeding extinction. A study by the Smithsonian Institution a couple of years ago indicated that the overall breeding birds population had declined by 3 billion, so we have 3 billion fewer breeding birds now than we did 50 years ago. Notably, bird species which do not depend on insects – such as doves, finches, and crossbills - did not decline at all in the last 50 years, however, but those which do depend on insects declined by an average rate of 10 million birds per species. It doesn’t prove cause and effect, but it does suggest that as you take bird food away, you lose the birds.”

As reported in the Washington Post three years ago, “the United Nations has predicted that we will lose one million species to extinction in the next twenty years, and most of these will be insects.”

“So, since this is a prediction, we need to do all that we can to ensure that it doesn’t happen BECAUSE THESE ARE THE SPECIES THAT RUN THE ECOSYSTEMS THAT WE ALL DEPEND ON!!!”

“Does this matter? Of course it does. The CREATURS THAT KEEP US ALIVE ARE DISAPPEARING!!! “

As to why we should ban ALL non-native plants, not just invasive plants, here are more reasons as conveyed again by Dr. Douglass Tallamy, this time from his book “Bringing Nature Home: How you can sustain wildlife with native plants”:

“When gardeners support the market for plants from other countries, they encourage the introduction of alien stock to North America, with two serious consequences. First, despite our best efforts to bring only “clean” plants into this country, we continually introduce harmful diseases and insects that evolved on other continents along with our beloved ornamentals. Secondly, the problems stemming from the introduction of unwanted disease or insect pests are obvious. Less obvious is that gardening with alien ornamentals place our native ecosystems at risk of destruction by yet another invasive plant species.”

“There are dozens of examples of plant diseases that were inadvertently brought to our shores with nursery stock, but none has been more devastating to our eastern deciduous forests than the chestnut blight. Within 50 years of its arrival, the American chestnut, the dominant upland forest tree species from Maine to Mississippi, a species which was the primary nut producer of eastern forests, dwarfing the contributions of oaks, beeches, and hickories as wildlife food sources, a species which played the equally important role in producing insects that supported a huge population of songbirds - a tree that had previously survived an asteroid impact and at least 20 glaciations during its 87 million years

of evolutionary history – was functionally eliminated from eastern deciduous forest ecosystems, along with an unknowable number of insect specialists that survived only the chestnut."

"Some might argue that the chestnut blight was a one-time fluke that cannot happen again. Plant species that are imported for the ornamental trade often carry disease and organisms to which they are resistant and show no symptoms. As long as we import hundreds of thousands of plants every year, there is real danger of introducing new diseases, perhaps even the next chestnut blight."

"A recent contender is sudden oak death disease, identified in the California nursery trade in 1995. It quickly escaped and killed tens of thousands of California oaks. Unbelievably, in May of 2005, infected nursery stock was shipped from California and Oregon to 23 other states before the mistake was caught. It is not hard to find a plant pathologist who thinks our oaks" – a genus which serves as the host plant for 436 species of caterpillars – the most of any genus – "will go the way of the chestnut, thanks to sudden oak death disease. We can only hope they are wrong. "

"As with plant diseases, the list of alien insects that have been imported into North America through the nursery trade is depressingly impressive and includes such serious pests as Japanese beetle, cottony cushion scale, viburnum leaf beetle, citrus long-horned beetle, hemlock woolly adelgid, and balsam woolly adelgid."

"Pests imported by the ornamental industry have also had serious impacts on agricultural crops. One of the most recent examples is the soybean aphid, which has cost hundreds of millions of dollars in soybean yield reduction in the Upper Midwest since its introduction in 2000."

"An even more recent invasion is threatening to put an end to the $9 billion citrus industry in Florida. *Candidatus liberibacter* is a bacterium that causes greening disease in citrus, a disease that makes fruit inedible before it kills the tree altogether. Greening disease, considered the worst citrus disease in the world, is unlikely to be contained because it is spread rapidly by the Asian citrus psyllid, a tiny homopteran insect that arrived on infested jasmine, an ornamental plant that is shipped by the thousands throughout Florida by discount stores."

The bottom line is that – "it is simply impossible to import alien nursery stock without bringing foreign diseases and insect pests to our shores, no matter how many regulatory agencies we establish to monitor such introductions."

We need to put an end to this insanity! The only way to do this is to prohibit the importation, transportation, disbursement, sale, purchase, or possession of **ALL species of non-native plants!**

“Although many gardeners insist otherwise, the plants we put in our gardens often do not stay in our gardens. When an alien species escapes, there is a measurable chance that it will be able to grow faster and reproduce more successfully than the native vegetation in the area” By the time that we notice it has spread from the spots that is was originally plants, it is too late. “By that time, they have become invasive species that expand their populations at exponential rates…To date, over 5000 species of alien plants have invaded the natural areas of North America.” “…The large-scale replacement of native vegetation with alien plants that we are experiencing across North America is having a number of serious consequences. In addition to their impact on insect production, aliens competitively exclude, and hybridize with, native vegetation, alter the frequency of wildfires and the availability of surface or ground water decrease the diversity of soil biota, deplete soil nutrients, degrade aquatic habitats through soil erosion, increase the competitive pressure on endangered plant species, and degrade wildlife forage.”

“How do we know which ornamental aliens have the capacity to become invasive and which do not?” “The fact is, it is very difficult to predict which species might become invasive should the right conditions arise.”

“Japanese honeysuckle, for example, was planted as an ornamental for 80 years before it escaped cultivation. No one is sure why this lag time occurs."

“If we can’t be sure about a particular plant’s future behavior in nature, the safe and responsible course of action is the most unpopular one: limit our use of aliens, no matter how well-behaved they seem to be.”

As of January 2026, **46 states** have "prohibited plant lists" that restrict or ban the sale of specific invasive plants at nurseries. Thus, only four states lacked a comprehensive prohibited plant sale list. Notably, and unfortunately, **Rhode Island is one of those states**.

“Why is this the case?
Is it because the nursery industry is concerned that nursery owners will lose lots of money if these plants are banned? It might be assumed here that if an invasive plant is banned, the public won’t buy an alternative that is not invasive. There is no data to support that contention.”

“There is a problem when the decision is left to the nursery owner to stop selling an invasive species voluntarily. Notably, if one nursery stops selling a particular invasive but a nearby nursery continues to sell it, the ethical nursery owner will lose business as long as the public remains ignorant about the ecological harm these plants cause.”

“In the state of Delaware, there was 100-percent support from both sides of the aisle for the ban which they enacted. During testimony from several nursery owners, many *favored* a ban, because if no nursery is allowed to sell a plant, no single nursery loses business. Customers will simply buy another plant.”

“In fact, as homeowners learn more about how biodiversity declines impair the production of the ecosystem services we all depend on, they are buying *more* ecosystem-friendly plants, not fewer, replacing lifeless lawns with plants that enhance ecosystem function rather than degrading it.”

“There are 135 million acres of residential landscapes in the United States. If we all add more non-invasive plants to our properties, it will not hurt the nursery trade!”

If we do not act on this and “we continue to lose our native insects, then:

1. Most of our flowering plants will go extinct.
2. That would change the physical structure and energy flow of most terrestrial habitats.
3. This would cause the rapid collapse of the food webs that support amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals.
4. The biosphere would rot due to the loss of insect decomposers.
5. Humanity would be doomed!”

In closing, let me reiterate, we need to not only prohibit the importation, transportation, disbursement, sale, purchase, or possession of any species of non-native (exotic) invasive plants, **but ALL species of non-native plants!**

Additionally, this should coincide with, as expressed by Representative Knight, **“a PSA program** for maximum effectiveness on the ground **and fund a half FTE for random spot inspections**”.

Whether we think we can’t afford to do something about this here in RI, we must!

Sincerely,

David A. Brunetti
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