



# Common Buckthorn

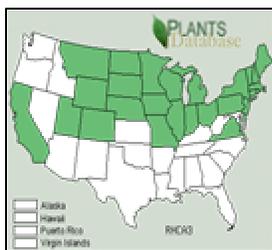
*Rhamnus cathartica* L.

**DESCRIPTION:** Common buckthorn is a shrub or small tree in the buckthorn family (Rhamnaceae) that can grow to 22 feet in height with a 10-inch wide trunk. The crown

shape of mature plants is spreading and irregular. The grey to brown bark is rough textured when mature and may be confused with that of plum trees. The inner bark is yellow and the heartwood is pink to orange. Twigs are often tipped with a spine. In spring, dense clusters of 2 to 6, yellow-green, 4-petaled flowers emerge from stems near the bases of leaf stalks. Small black fruits about 1/4 inch in cross-section and containing 3-4 seeds, form in the fall. Leaves are broadly oval, rounded or pointed at the tip, with 3-4 pairs of up curved veins, and have jagged, toothed margins. Leaves appear dark, glossy green on the upper surface and stay green late into fall, after most other deciduous leaves have fallen.



**ECOLOGICAL THREAT:** Exotic buckthorns tend to form dense, even-aged thickets, crowding and shading out native shrubs and herbs, often completely eradicating them. Dense buckthorn seedlings prevent native tree and shrub regeneration. In fire-adapted ecosystems such as savannas and prairies, the lack of vegetation under buckthorn prohibits fires. Buckthorn control is also of interest to small grain producers; the shrub is an alternate host of the crown rust of oats, which affects oat yield and quality.



**DISTRIBUTION IN THE UNITED STATES:** Common buckthorn has become naturalized from Nova Scotia to Saskatchewan, south to Missouri, and east to New England.

**HABITAT IN THE UNITED STATES:** Common buckthorn prefers lightly shaded conditions. An invader mainly of open oak woods, deadfall openings in woodlands, and woods edges, it may also be found in prairies and open fields. It is tolerant of many soil types, well drained sand, clay, poorly drained calcareous, neutral or alkaline, wet or dry.

**CURRENT MANAGEMENT APPROACHES:** This plant is listed as an invasive and noxious weed by the U. S. federal government. Mechanical, physical and chemical methods are used to control common buckthorn and glossy buckthorn (*Rhamnus frangula*), also an invasive exotic plant. Prescribed fire is another method proposed for controlling buckthorn seedlings in fire-adapted natural areas. Careful application of herbicides such as, triclopyr herbicide effectively controls common buckthorn.

References: <http://plants.usda.gov/> <http://www.nps.gov/plants/alien/>