

Japanese Barberry

Berberis thunbergii



[Further
Information
and
References](#)

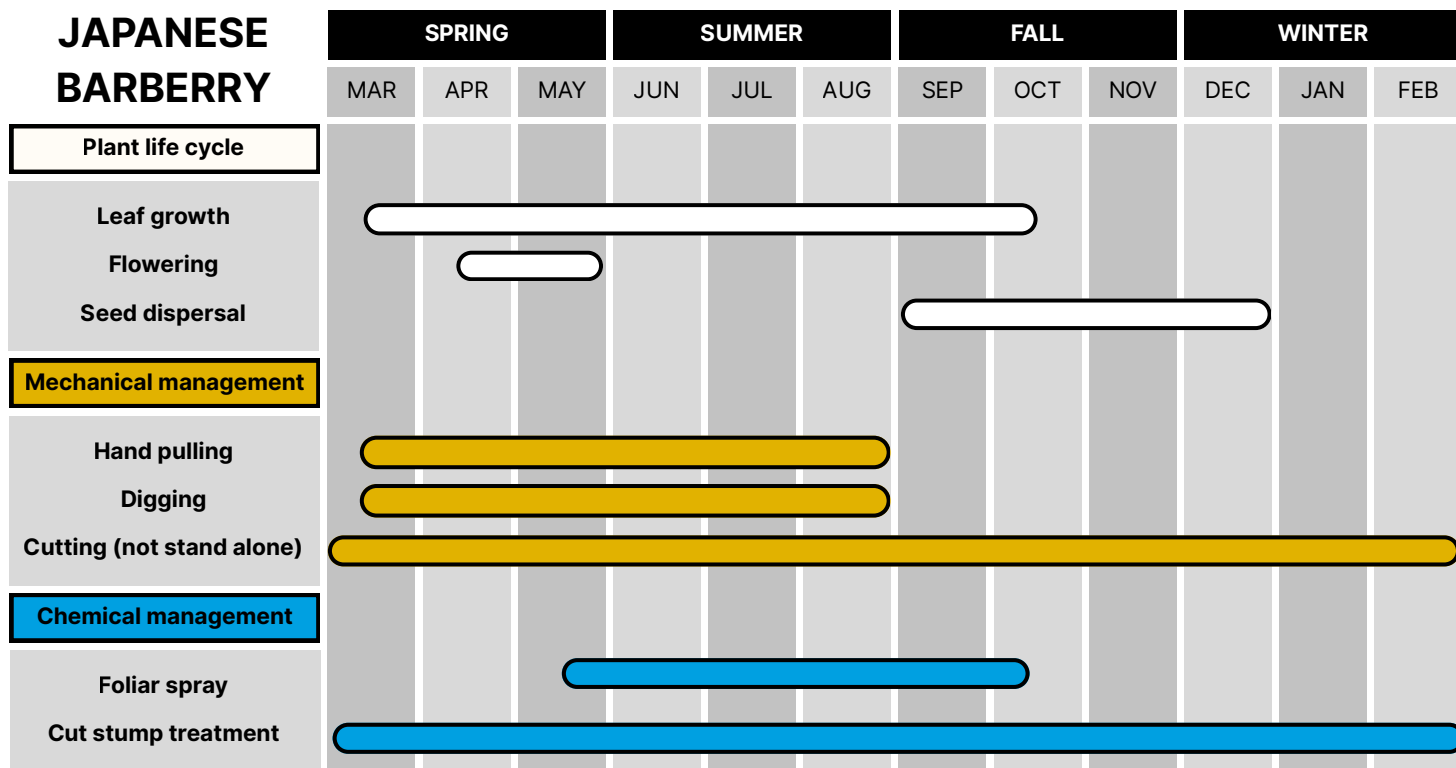


Quick Facts: Japanese Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*) is an invasive deciduous shrub that was originally introduced to the United States as a landscape plant. While this species prefers part-shade and well-drained soils, it is adaptable under drought conditions and can tolerate full sun. Japanese Barberry frequently escapes landscape plantings and colonizes pastures, roadsides, early successional habitats, riparian zones, and woodlands. It is also resistant to deer browse, and quickly spreads in areas where deer feed heavily on native shrubs and other vegetation. Due to its early leaf out period, this species displaces ephemeral wildflowers. This plant has been banned from sale in Indiana and several northeastern states.

Invasion Strategy: Japanese Barberry seed is dispersed by small mammals and birds and can have as high as a 90% germination rate. Shrubs in full sun produce the most fruits and seeds, but shrubs growing in shade will also set seed. This species also reproduces via rhizomatic shoots. This plant will also resprout after cutting, fire, or when the tips of branches touch the ground.

Identifying Features: Japanese Barberry is a deciduous shrub that grows up to 6 feet tall. It forms dense, clonal thickets. This species can be identified via the following characteristics:

- Straight, sharp spines are present along the stem at each leaf node. Spines are present year-round and are an easy way to identify this species.
- The inner wood of the stems is yellow.
- Leaves are arranged in alternating clusters on the stem.
- Leaves are small and oval shaped with smooth edges.
- Leaves emerge early in the spring, much sooner than many native shrub species.
- Flowers are pale yellow in color and dangle in clusters of two to four blossoms per node.
- Flowers bloom along the entire length of each stem.
- Fruits (also called berries) are hard, red, and egg-shaped.
- Fruits ripen in late summer but are held on stems through the winter.



This chart is based on USDA plant hardiness zone 6. Plant growth and treatment times vary by region.

Management methods:

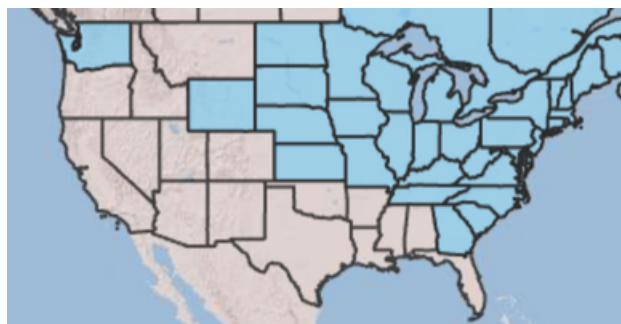
Mechanical - Digging and pulling are effective control methods on young plants and small stands of this species. It is important to remove the entire root ball, or it will resprout. Mowing and cutting will weaken adult plants, but are not enough to completely eradicate them. Cutting and mowing in conjunction with chemical control are very effective.

Chemical - Foliar spray is very effective on large stands of Japanese barberry. Multiple applications of herbicide may be necessary if resprouts occur. Cut stump methods are also very effective in managing this species. Herbicide application following a controlled burn will also kill adult plants and any resprouts that appear the following season.

Disclaimer - Selecting the best management method for this plant can be site and context-specific. Check with your local USDA Service Center or University Extension agent to explore your options and determine what is most appropriate for your location and situation.

Management information: Dispose of cut plant materials where they cannot resprout. If seeds are present, bag them and dispose of them in a landfill.

Spines of this species pose risk of injury. Personal protective equipment is recommended when removing any invasive species, and especially when using herbicides. Always follow label instructions when using herbicide.



■ Species present

■ Absent

Look-Alike Species:

- American Barberry, *Berberis canadensis*
- This native species (supplemental photos 1 and 2) looks very similar to Japanese Barberry, but has toothed leaves. Blooms hang from the central stem of the plant, not attaching directly to the twigs like Japanese Barberry.



Look-Alike Species:

- Common Barberry, *Berberis vulgaris*
- This invasive species (supplemental photos 3 and 4) also looks very similar to Japanese Barberry. It has very finely toothed leaves (more than American Barberry) and produces 3-pronged spines (versus 1 prong with Japanese barberry). Management methods for Common and Japanese Barberry are very similar but management timelines differ.



References and Additional Reading:

- Michigan Department of Natural Resources. 2012. [Japanese Barberry](#). [Identification, mechanical, and chemical control information].
- Ohio State University Extension. 2022. [Controlling Non-Native Invasive Plants: Common and Japanese Barberry](#). [Identification, mechanical, and chemical control information].
- PennState Extension. 2025. [Japanese Barberry](#). [Mechanical and chemical control information].
- University of Connecticut. 2021. [Invasive Plant Fact Sheet: Japanese Barberry](#). [Identification, mechanical, and chemical control information].
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. 2005. [INVASIVE PLANTS IN FORESTRY - MANAGEMENT GUIDE Japanese Barberry \(Berberis thunbergii\)](#). [Identification information].

Photo Credits: Photo 1: iNaturalist, emmamarita; Photo 2: Native Plant Trust, Donna Kausen; Photo 3: iNaturalist, bbl80; Photo 4: iNaturalist, Michael and Antoni Hinczewski; Range map: USDA PLANTS database; Supplemental photo 1: iNaturalist, Rosie Green; Supplemental photo 2: iNaturalist, Eric Soehren; Supplemental photo 3: iNaturalist, Mara McHaffie; Supplemental photo 4: iNaturalist, Martin A. Prinz.

Resources:

- Find your local [University Extension Program](#)
- Find your local [USDA NRCS Service Center](#)
- Find your local [Soil and Water Conservation District](#)
- Check out [Management and Control of Woody Invasive Species](#)
- Check out Purdue University Extension's [Woody Encroachment and Woody Invasives](#) fact sheet
- Check out other [invasive plant fact sheets](#)

Acknowledgements:

Fact sheets created by Sophia Sorboro, Ella Stroh, Kaleigh Obrock, and Amber Barnes with edits provided by Ohio NRCS, Indiana NRCS, and Indiana DNR .