Species You Should Know
Buckthorn, *Rhamnus cathartica*

Buckthorn, or European buckthorn, is one of the most invasive species in the Chicago region. It is easily identifiable this time of year, as its leaves stay green after most trees have lost their leaves for the season. Buckthorn's simple leaves are elliptical in shape, about three inches long, and have veins that curve toward the tip. Its dark gray bark peels in strips and has noticeable lenticels.

Twigs often have thorny projections toward the tips, hence the common name. Cut buckthorn branches reveal the species' yellow sapwood and orange heartwood, which is a useful way to confirm its identification.

Buckthorn's habit varies from a small tree to 25 feet in height, to a shorter, broader shrub. It often grows in thick stands in the understory, crowding out other species and thus diminishing area diversity. It is very shade-tolerant, which also helps buckthorn out-compete native shrubs and tree saplings. Buckthorn also readily re-sprouts when cut, making it difficult to remove. Birds are fond of the dark fruit, which contributes to its pervasiveness.

Buckthorn's tale of an imported species that escaped control ran rampant is all too common. But concerted efforts are underway to remove it that will help restore our urban forests' native species.

For more information on this species, please contact trees@openlands.org.