

Rhode Island Invasive Plant Management Act of 2026 – Policy Brief

H7071 (Boylan) Introduced and scheduled for hearing on January 22, 2026

S2352 (McKenney) Introduced

Summary

The Rhode Island Invasive Plant Management Act of 2026 tackles the challenges posed by specific invasive plant species by broadening the State's existing list of prohibited invasive aquatic plants to incorporate certain invasive terrestrial plants. The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) will take the lead in creating this list, drawing upon a wealth of existing tools, resources, and lists already at their disposal. Currently, Rhode Island stands out as the only New England state and one of just five states nationwide that does not regulate the propagation, import, and sale of harmful invasive terrestrial plants, which is essential for protecting its vital ecosystems. USDA Forest Services identifies invasive plants as one of four key threats facing the nation's forests and grasslands.

Introduction

Invasive plants present substantial risks to natural ecosystems, agriculture, and economic productivity. An invasive plant is a non-native species that spreads rapidly and aggressively in a new environment, often outcompeting local flora. Invasive plants disrupt natural ecosystems, reduce biodiversity, and can even negatively impact agriculture, water resources, and recreational areas. Their ability to thrive outside their native range allows them to dominate landscapes, crowding out native plants and altering habitats that wildlife depend on. In Rhode Island, invasive plants have taken hold, threatening local plant communities and habitats. State agencies, conservation organizations, and private landowners spend hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours annually trying to mitigate the spread of invasive plants.

The Difference Between Native, Nonnative, and Invasive Plants

Native plants are indigenous to a particular region or ecosystem, having evolved in concert with local wildlife, soils, and climatic conditions over hundreds of thousands of years. They are essential components of thriving ecosystems and are critical to the biodiversity of our state. These plants are also essential tools for stormwater management, climate mitigation, and coastal preservation. Despite their enormous value to our state, less than 20% of plants sold through the nursery trade are native species and our region's landscapes are heavily dominated by nonnative plants.

Nonnative plants—also termed exotic, introduced, or ornamental species—are those that have been brought to an area outside their natural range by human activity, either intentionally or accidentally. These are predominately used in ornamental gardening and have also been used historically in forestry and agriculture. Many nonnative plants have cultural or sentimental value and a history of human uses. While nonnative plants do not support our local ecosystem in the same way as native species, most do not cause any harm and do not need to be managed in any particular way.

Invasive plants are a specific subset of nonnative species that not only successfully establish themselves in a region but also spread aggressively, causing environmental degradation, economic loss, and, in some cases, harm to human health. Invasive species diminish biodiversity by supplanting native plants, thereby undermining wildlife habitats and ecosystem resilience. They often alter soil chemistry and hydrology, resulting in lasting ecological change.

Not all nonnative plants are invasive. According to the Non-Native Species Secretariat, only 10-15% of introduced plants have historically become invasive and begun to cause ecological harm. However, these plants require diligent and thoughtful management, including legislative and regulatory efforts. Over several decades, peer reviewed research has consistently shown that anywhere from 60-85% of invasive plants were at some point intentionally introduced through active sale and planting. This finding was emphasized in current research which took place close by in Massachusetts:

Beaury, E. M., Patrick, M., & Bradley, B. A. (2021). Invaders for sale: The ongoing spread of invasive species by the plant trade industry. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*

To explore more on pathways of introduction as well as noted ecological and economic harm refer to resources and research available through:

Cornell Botanical Gardens (a premier educational and research horticultural institution)

<https://cornellbotanicgardens.org/conserve/invasive-species/invasive-plants-faqs>

The Northeast Regional Invasive Species & Climate Change Management Network <https://www.risccnetwork.org/northeast>

Invasive Plant Species in Rhode Island

The Natural History Survey, an independent nonprofit, chairs the Rhode Island Invasive Species Council, a voluntary collaboration among organizations with substantial interests in the prevention, documentation, and management of invasive species in the State. The Council of experts has developed a non-regulatory list of invasive and weedy plants in Rhode Island, current as of 2020, which can be viewed on their website here <https://rinhs.org/species/invasive-species/>. Rhode Island regulates the sale and distribution of invasive aquatic plants but places no restrictions on the sale of invasive terrestrial plants.

The Important Role of Prohibited Plant Lists

According to the National Invasive Species Information Center, preventing the introduction of invasive plants is widely recognized as the most effective and cost-efficient management strategy. Prohibited plant lists are essential regulatory tools. These lists enable government agencies to restrict the importation, sale, cultivation, transport, and distribution of identified high-risk plant species. Prohibited plant lists provide a statutory framework that informs land managers, horticulturalists, nurseries, and the public about regulated species and the rationale for their control.

New Hampshire led the region in 1997 when it implemented a prohibited plant list restricting the sale of plants still commonly sold in Rhode Island today. With an eye to proactively protecting the essential biodiversity of our region, other New England states soon followed suit. Massachusetts created a prohibited plant program in 2006 and currently bans the sale and distribution of more than 140 plant species. Connecticut instituted their program in 2004 and currently regulates more than 100 species with new plants being added as recently as this year. Vermont implemented prohibitions in 2012 and now restricts 39 species and Maine came on board in 2017 and now restricts more than 70 varieties.

It is well past time for Rhode Island to join other New England states in implementing this important approach. Stopping the spread at the source is part of being a good neighbor and working to jointly preserve biodiversity in New England. This is vital for ecosystem health, climate resilience, and economic stability, protecting critical services like clean water, air purification, and pollination. Thriving and biodiverse ecosystems sustain the region's tourism and fishing industries while bolstering natural defenses against climate change and disasters.

Frequently asked questions

What does this mean for people who already have invasive plants in their yard? Prohibited plant lists only restrict propagation, sale and distribution and have no impact on people's existing plantings. However, these lists do offer important public education which has been shown to encourage many property owners to voluntarily replace invasive plantings with more desirable species over time. In fact, some states offer incentive programs to encourage homeowners to replace invasive plants with native varieties and other states provide "green lists" of recommended substitutions.

How would this list be created? Rhode Island DEM would be charged with creating the list, but resources such as Rhode Island's existing invasive plant list and prohibited plant lists from neighboring states are available to ease the burden.

How would this list be updated? Typically, the state department charged with managing the prohibited plant list makes additions as new scientific information comes available. These generally take place after periods of public comment.

Will this negatively impact the nursery industry? While on the one hand nurseries who continue to grow and sell invasive plants stand to lose revenue, the system currently favors those businesses which knowingly continue to promote plants shown to cause environmental and economic harm. Prohibited plant lists and corresponding community education level the playing field for the many businesses who voluntarily ceased the sale of invasive plants. Prohibited plant lists typically include phase out periods that enable growers to sell down stock, mitigating economic hardship.

Will this place too much of a burden on state agencies? RI DEM already conducts licensing and inspection of nurseries and should reasonably be able to add this monitoring to those already routine checklists and visits.

Conclusion

Invasive plants represent a persistent threat to the ecological integrity and economic viability of Rhode Island and the nation. The creation, maintenance, and enforcement of prohibited plant lists are vital policy tools for addressing these challenges. Continued legislative support and interagency collaboration are necessary to safeguard biodiversity, promote sustainable land use, and reduce the ongoing costs associated with invasive plant management.

ACTION ALERT – A HEARING HAS BEEN SCHEDULED FOR THE SENATE VERSION OF THE INVASIVE PLANT MANAGEMENT BILL FOR WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 2026. YOUR SUPPORT IS NEEDED! READ THE DETAILS BELOW.

HOW TO SUPPORT THIS BILL! Read below and note that the steps outlined below are the only way to show official support for this bill – If you want to see this legislation passed this session please follow the steps carefully! Thank you for being a champion for Rhode Island’s wild spaces.

The hearing to support passage of the Senate version of **The RI Invasives Plant Management Bill, S2352** which would prohibit the sale of select invasive plants in RI, has been scheduled for this **Wednesday, April 8, 2026 at 4:00pm** in the Senate Lounge at the RI Statehouse. This is the companion bill to [H7071](#), the House version of this bill, which had a hearing on January 22, 2026. Providing support for the Senate version of this bill is **just as important** as supporting the House version to get this legislation over the finish line.

There are three ways you can support the passage of this bill:

- Email written testimony to the Committee by **Wednesday, April 8 at 3:00pm**.
- Attend the hearing this **Wednesday, April 8 at 4:00pm** and offer oral testimony in support of the bill.
- Attend the hearing in person this **Wednesday, April 8 at 4:00 pm** and sign in “in support” of the bill. You do not need to testify but can register support in this way.

All are important, and all are needed.

If you’re attending the hearing, **please wear green** to show your support for the bill.

Please share this email with anyone who is interested in the passage of this bill, especially if you believe they will take action to submit written or verbal comments!

The full hearing agenda for Wednesday is [here](#).

Email written testimony to the Committee: (Testimony Template below) PLEASE NOTE – the steps below are the only way to officially show support for this – just sending a note to your representative is not the same as submitting official (on the record) testimony in support.

- If you sent testimony back in January to support the House version of this bill, H7071, **you can send the same testimony to support the Senate version. If you are interested in reviewing testimony that was submitted for H7071 you can read it [HERE](#) (go to 1/22/26 date and search for H7071).**
- Send your email to the committee clerk. Ideally, by 3pm on 4/8). SLegislation@rilegislature.gov
- Always cc your own [Senator](#) so they are aware.
- Testimony must include: your name/organization, bill number **S2353** and viewpoint (for/against/neither).
- Anything you write will be posted publicly so you may not want to include your street address (I recommend including your town).
- There is more information on testifying [here](https://www.rilegislature.gov/SiteAssets/WrittenTestimony.pdf) <https://www.rilegislature.gov/SiteAssets/WrittenTestimony.pdf>
- If you provide data, include footnotes or citations.
- There is no limit to written testimony as long as it’s relevant; it can be 1 sentence or 1 paragraph or 1 page or 10 pages.

Testify in person before the Committee: (Wear Green)

- This would be done in addition to written testimony. Bring a friend or two, snacks, water and be prepared to wait a bit as it’s a long process.
- PLEASE NOTE: Wednesday 4/8 is expected to be an especially busy day at the State House - **Expect long lines and delays to get into the building.** We recommend arriving early (before 3p if possible).
- It helps to bring a copy of the committee hearing [agenda](#) so you can follow along.
- The hearing is in the Senate Lounge. Take the elevator to the second floor, turn left and go straight down the hallway. The Senate Lounge is towards the end of the hallway on the right.
- When you arrive at the hearing room, find the signup sheets to sign up to testify to support S2353. Often these papers are on a table just inside the hearing room but they could also be in the hallway outside the door. If the hearing has already started when you arrive, you should go into the hearing room and find the committee clerk who is usually sitting to the side of the Committee. The clerk should assist you in getting

signed in. If the room fills up, you may be sent to another room for overflow seating where you can watch a livestream of the hearing. You can still testify. When they call your name, just head to the hearing room and let them know you were called to testify.

- When you are called up to testify, you will sit at the table addressing the committee. There will be a microphone and the hearing is recorded/streamed.
- Plan to make your points in about 2 minutes or less. Be polite, concise, and speak from the heart.
- Stick to the merits of the bill. If you go on a tangent, the committee chair will re-direct you.

Parking: Metered parking is available on Smith, Francis and Gaspee Streets. Bring a credit card or (better) use the PassPort App. Late in the day, parking is also available in the lot off of State Street at the corner of Smith Street on a first-come-first-served basis. If the gate to this lot is up (generally after 4pm), this is the closest place to park to the State House. If the gate is down, it's not open to the public.

The only building entrance open to the public is on Smith Street on the north side of the building. The address is 82 Smith Street.

You can also park in Providence Place mall, but please allow plenty of time for walking up the hill to the State House (it's not as close as you think).

In addition the formal ways to support this above consider other ways you can help to ensure the passage of this legislation this session. This includes talking to others, writing letters to the editor, sharing information on social media, and more!

In Case it is helpful – here is a Testimony Template you can use!

TO: Chair Sosnowski and honorable members of the Senate Environment and Agriculture Committee [Email:SLegislation@rilegislature.gov](mailto:SLegislation@rilegislature.gov)

CC: [Your Senator] and [Your Representative]

FROM: [NAME]

RE: Support for S2352

DATE: [DATE]

Chair and honorable members of the Senate Environment and Agriculture Committee:

My name is [NAME] and I live in [CITY/TOWN].

I am writing to urge you to support S2352 (McKenney), which would prohibit the importation, transportation, disbursement, distribution, sale, or purchase of any species of non-native (exotic) invasive plants.

[INSERT ANY DETAILS HERE ABOUT WHY THIS BILL IS IMPORTANT TO YOU/TO RHODE ISLAND – PLEASE CUSTOMIZE THE INFORMATION BELOW.]

Rhode Island is one of only four states without a prohibited plant sale list, a list that restricts the sale and distribution of invasive plants, and the only state in New England without one. Invasive plants are a specific category of non-native plant that have been shown to wreak havoc on local ecosystems by spreading exponentially and crowding out native plants species.

This bill would prohibit the sale of these plant species at nurseries, garden centers and anywhere plants are sold in the state. Research has shown that 60% of invasive plants are introduced through their intentional sale and planting (Beaury et al., 2021). Please pass this bill out of committee and to the Senate floor with a recommendation for passage.

Sincerely,

[NAME/CITY/TOWN]

EM, Beaury, Patrick M, and Bradley BA. "Invaders for sale: the ongoing spread of invasive species by the plant trade industry." 2021.