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A stinky situation

Garlic mustard plants invading northern forests

The Associated Press

STEVENS POINT — Garlic mustard tastes pretty good, but it's leaving a bad taste in the mouths of forestry experts who say the nonnative species is creeping northward in the state and choking out native plant life.

Earlier this month, UW-Stevens Point kicked off a program that joins with 17 Wisconsin school districts to track the spread of the plant and post the results online. Staff from Beaver Creek Reserve's Citizen Science Center north of Fall Creek designed the database to help organize and showcase the data, said Jeremy Solin, a Wisconsin school forest education specialist at the university.

Those involved say the project would not only help control the plant's northward spread, but also help provide an important lesson on invasive species for Wisconsin students.

"It seeds in an area very heavily and will out-compete everything — trees, seedlings, wildflowers and other plants," Solin said.

"The really difficult thing with dealing with garlic mustard is it can invade healthy forests," he said. "It can grow just about anywhere. It's kind of spreading through the state."

Between now and June 30, district employees who attended a May 7 workshop on the plant will work with students to track garlic mustard and map the results online.

Although garlic mustard is more common in the southern portion of Wisconsin, the species is moving north, said Kelly Kearns, plant conservation program manager with the endangered resources program of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

"People tend to think, 'Well, I just have a small population of it. It's not a problem right now,' " she said. "As soon as one plant gets into your forest and you don't get rid of it, that plant will put out several hundred seeds."

"Within five years, you can easily go from one plant to five acres of very heavy infestation."