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Effort to eradicate invasive chokecherry trees in Anchorage takes determination —  
and \$100 bounties

By [Morgan Krakow](#)

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A barren understory is seen below a canopy of invasive chokecherry trees in the Chester Creek Greenbelt on Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021 in Anchorage. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

It's a beast. It's a bully. And its time is up, forest experts and community members say.

The ornamental chokecherry tree, invasive in Alaska, has gotten so bad in some areas that the state used grant money to [offer people in Anchorage \\$100](#) to get rid of them, in the form of a voucher redeemable at a local nursery.

The program was so popular it's no longer taking applicants, and there's a waitlist. The state had \$8,000 to pay out in vouchers, enough for 80 recipients, said Jim Renkert, community forestry program manager for the Division of Forestry. Over 100 people applied.



But the mission to eradicate the invasive trees isn't over.

"It's beautiful, but it's a beast," Renkert said.

Chokecherry varieties like *Prunus padus*, known also as the Mayday tree or European Bird Cherry, and the *Prunus virginiana*, known as the Canada Red, are the ones officials want removed and pose significant issues for local plants and wildlife.

"Once it starts getting into an unmowed or untended area, it takes over and bullies out everything else," Renkert said.

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A chokecherry tree grows in a yard in the Airport Heights neighborhood of Anchorage on Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

The beautiful and cold-tolerant trees were planted around Alaska as an ornamental beginning in the 1950s. They have stunning white flowers that bloom in springtime, and they smell great.

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“But now what we’ve seen is it’s gone feral,” Renkert said. “Some ecologists call it a rogue ornamental.”

Local birds began eating the tree’s fruits in turn dropping the seeds around town. What was once just a nice, groomed tree in peoples’ yards soon mushroomed into a “jungle,” in local greenbelts, especially in moist areas near creeks and streams, crowding out native shrubs and other species, Renkert said.



Orange tape with the words "invasive species" hang from chokecherry trees in the Chester Creek Greenbelt on Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021 in Anchorage. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

The state has several different programs, in addition to the vouchers, to get rid of the trees.

“The most effective way to combat invasive species is through education,” Renkert said.

“And so we saw this as a way to encourage and incentivize Anchorage homeowners to consider removing their tree.”

Also, this Saturday, volunteers are invited to help remove the invasive trees at Valley of the Moon Park and along the Chester Creek Trail from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. with the [Anchorage Park Foundation](#).



The trees spell trouble for many things further up the food chain, said Betty Charnonan, the invasive plant program manager with the U.S. Forest Service in Alaska.

When invasive plants start choking out the native plants, it can mess with animals that feed or live nearby.

Chokecherry trees are poisonous to a lot of different species, including moose.



A chokecherry sapling grows in the Chester Creek Greenbelt on Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021 in Anchorage. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

There's no organized effort to monitor how many moose have been killed by chokecherry poisoning, but anecdotally, state wildlife biologists see the incidents yearly, said Dave Battle, Anchorage-area biologist with the Department of Fish and Game.

Mostly, the poisonings happen in moose calves, even late into winter when the calves weigh several hundred pounds and have grown quite large, Battle said.

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Some research has also showed that there are fewer insects along streams dominated by chokecherries. That means salmon, which eat insects that fall into the water, are also impacted.

For those looking to replace a tree, Renkert suggested an amur maple, a crab apple tree or an amur chokecherry (a type of chokecherry that hasn't gone feral). He also suggested trees native to the state like birch or spruce.

Sally Gibert, who lives along the Chester Creek Greenbelt, has had a front-row seat to the chokecherry's domination over the years, and spends several hours every summer and fall trying to weed out tree sprouts along the trail.



Sally Gibert stands next to a section of woods overtaken by invasive chokecherry trees in the Chester Creek Greenbelt on Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021 in Anchorage. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

"There's so much of it," Gibert said. "And I really like the character of the original trail behind our house. It's open, there's roses and fireweed and willows ... but when the Mayday trees take over, it just becomes a wall."

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On a recent walk through her backyard and down to the trail, Gibert spotted a chokecherry tree sprout out of the corner of her eye, a few leaves no wider than an inch or two.

“I can’t not see them,” Gibert said.

She tugged at the moist, loose soil, carefully pulling a root nearly triple the length of the sprout from the earth.



Sally Gibert holds up an invasive chokecherry sapling that she pulled from the Chester Creek Greenbelt on Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021 in Anchorage. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

That’s par for the course. Their roots grow long and deep. And even if the trees are cut or pulled, they can spring back up.

In corridor where she was weeding, it was full of the good, old stuff -- rosebuds, raspberries, cow parsnip. But walk several meters in either direction and suddenly, it was nothing but chokecherry trees.

Gibert said people sometimes stop her and inquire about what she’s doing as she weeds. Occasionally, they help tug away the trees as well.

HB 191 Supporting Document – Anchorage Daily News Article on Chokecherry Trees –  
Krakow 8.25.21

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As she walked down the trail, Gibert acknowledged keeping the plants at bay is a challenge.

“I know it’s a losing battle,” she said. “But at least it looks nice for a while.”

### [Morgan Krakow](#)

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