For many years our parks were maintained by cutting all of the vegetation along the streambanks. This practice created a manicured aesthetic that may be considered idyllic by some, but produced many, many problems. With no roots to stabilize streambanks, and no vegetation to slow and absorb overland runoff, every storm caused more and more erosion. The resultant sedimentation smothered the stream bottom habitats fish and aquatic insects depend on. The lack of trees meant a lack of shade, and many waterways became too warm to support self-sustaining trout populations. The relative absence of native flowers, trees and shrubs meant no food and no habitat for the birds and other wildlife we all love.

Across the country, cities and townships big and small are abandoning these maintenance practices, and a nationwide effort to "naturalize" public places is gaining ground. Last year the City of Allentown began taking steps to improve water quality and wildlife habitat in and along the streams that flow through the parks by establishing *grow zones*. These are areas where vegetation is left to re-grow, instead of being mowed on a weekly basis.

Unfortunately, restoring the ecological integrity of a landscape is no easy task. As disturbed areas (especially those that are heavily used by people) begin to re-vegetate, invasive plants will dominate and threaten ecological recovery. Ecologists have come to recognize invasive species as a major cause of extinction.

Invasive plants tend to be generalists that can grow in a wide range of conditions and can reproduce quickly. Most invasive plants are not native to our part of the world; they were imported either for their perceived medicinal, aesthetic, or for landscape values, or were brought here accidentally. When these plants arrived in their new home, they suddenly found themselves without the biological controls (predators, adverse weather conditions, disease) that kept their populations in balance in their native habitats. Conversely, as these invasive plants began to out-compete and eradicate native plants, many of our native insects, birds, and mammals found their food sources dwindling, being replaced with foreign, and often inedible, plants.

The Parks & Recreation Department is partnering with Wildlands Conservancy to combat our invasive plants problem. Fighting back these invasions is an enormously challenging undertaking, but it is doable and it is important. We have developed and are implementing a comprehensive invasive species management plan and maintenance schedule. Parks staff recently attended invasive plant management training sessions, held by ecologists from Wildlands, where they learned how to identify and treat the most detrimental invaders to our parks, including Japanese hops, Purple loosestrife, and Japanese knotweed, along with many others. Throughout the year the Parks Department staff will be working hard to control invasive plants. Please support their efforts to improve our environment. You may notice unattractive areas where vegetation has been cut and in some cases sprayed with herbicides. Understand that these areas are in the process of ecological restoration and recovery, and that we are working to improve the quality of our parks and the natural resources they protect, so they can be enjoyed for generations to come.

Restoration of Trout Creek Park

One of the most serious invasions can be seen at Trout Creek Park, where Japanese knotweed has spread like a wildfire, and now makes up the vast majority of the plant life in the 75 acre park. This year the Parks Department began a management program to systematically cut and treat the knotweed, and Wildlands Conservancy was recently awarded a grant from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation to restore habitat and improve water quality in the Park. The Parks Department and Wildlands will work together in 2011 to eradicate knotweed, restore streambanks, and replant native trees and shrubs throughout the Park. As always, we are looking for community members and groups who are willing to pitch in and help us restore and protect Trout Creek Park.