

HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

NATIONAL INVASIVE WEED AWARENESS WEEK

February 24 to February 29, 2008 is [National Invasive Weeds Awareness Week](#) (NIWAW). This week long awareness campaign is intended to focus national attention on the impacts caused by invasive weeds.

To give you a better idea of what we mean when we talk about invasives, let's first discuss the plants that were already here, our native plants. A native plant is a species that has adapted to a particular environment and does not take over its home range. Native plants often provide food and shelter to the animals and other critters living within the home (or native) range. Natives are not invasive, it's all about peace, love and harmony with natives.

Non-native plants are those species that come from different places around the world. Just because a plant is not native, that doesn't mean it is bad! You might think Oranges are native to Florida because they can be found all over the state, but they are actually non-native, brought to the U.S. from Southeast Asia! Many of the ornamental plants that we see in the landscape are not native, but that is alright, as long as they do not get out of control.

When non-natives get out of control that is when they become invasive. An invasive plant is a non-native plant species that has escaped cultivation, can spread on its own and cause environmental or economic harm. Invasive non-native plants can outgrow, replace, and destroy our native plant communities.

When non-native plants are introduced to a new area their natural enemies are typically left behind, leaving the plant to grow freely, without anything to stop it! Natural enemies are the diseases, insects and other factors that keep non-natives in check in their native ranges. Our native plants are very important for the ecosystems around us.

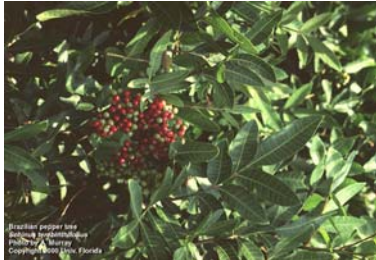
Why should we care if other plants grow and take over our natives? If we lose our native plant communities, the results can be catastrophic: our natural biodiversity is lost, our natives are lost, wildlife and other animals no longer have the food and shelter they had with native plants, even fish can be affected. Plants like hydrilla and water hyacinth can fill water bodies and essentially choke out native plants. There's nothing worse than being out on the water and getting stuck in a mat of hydrilla.

Education is the key in the fight against invasive plants. We must educate citizens at the local level so they understand the impacts invasive plants have on our native ecosystems, even the impacts to our economy. Throughout the week of Invasive Weed Awareness, take some time to look around and see which invasive plants are growing in your area. We encourage you learn how to identify these invasives so that you can help stop their spread:



Hydrilla: Hydrilla spreads when fragments are transported from one water body to another, usually by boats and their trailers. It grows quickly to form dense mats that shade out and replace native plants. The weed is a very big problem in the Lakes in the Kissimmee Chain, and the Osceola County Extension Office is conducting research and educating residents on how to prevent its spread.

Cogongrass: This is a perennial grass that grows 3 to 10 feet tall and forms dense monocultures. Cogongrass is extremely aggressive and often grows so thick it prevents other plants from growing. The rhizomes can grow 4 feet deep into the ground which makes this plant very difficult to control.



Brazilian Pepper: Yes, this plant produces the pepper that we use in pepper mills, but it is pretty darn invasive. Brazilian pepper-tree is a shrub or small tree that can grow to be 33 feet tall! Birds and mammals are the chief means of seed dispersal (they can't resist the bright colored seeds).

Air Potato: Even though this plant is more of a pest than anything here in Central Florida, air potato is actually grown for consumption in Africa. Air potato is a vine that produces 'potatoes in the air'. Believe it or not, in just one growing season air potato can grow up to 70 feet!



Old World Climbing Fern: This vine (which is a fern and reproduces from spores) will climb up through the tree canopy and kill growing branches. Old world climbing fern can grow up to 100 feet into tree canopies and shade out the plants below. This fellow also has the ability to resprout from any part of its leaf, making this another nasty plant to manage.

Osceola County is doing a great deal to inform its citizens about invasive plants. Currently we are working on a \$2.881 million dollar grant from the EPA to evaluate new and alternative ways to control hydrilla in the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes. We are also in the beginning stages of establishing an Invasive Weed Task Force that will help land owners develop weed management plans to help prevent the spread of invasives.

For more information on invasive weeds, pictures and what you can do to help prevent their spread, please visit our website: <http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/osceola>

(Photos courtesy of The University of Florida/IFAS Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants. Used with permission.)

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