



Invasive Species Management Plans for Florida

Asparagus Fern

***Asparagus densiflorus* syn. *A. sprengeri* (Kunth)**

Liliaceae

INTRODUCTION

Asparagus densiflorus is native to South Africa and is an evergreen herb that is commonly used as a groundcover or in container plantings. It is also widely used in hanging baskets for its showy foliage and bright red berries. The common name is somewhat deceiving because asparagus fern is not a fern at all, it merely resembles a fern. In fact, asparagus fern is a member of the Liliaceae, or Lily family, which includes plants such as amaryllis, daylilies, hosta, and tulips.

Although this plant is widely cultivated and used across the country as an ornamental, it is on the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council's list of invasive species as a Category II invasive. Asparagus fern can be found in many natural areas throughout Florida including Hillsborough, Lee, and Polk counties.

DESCRIPTION

Asparagus densiflorus is a slightly woody evergreen plant with upright or trailing branches, able to grow up to 2 feet in height and 6 feet in length. Tiny spines are borne in axils along branches. Needle-like branchlets are clustered in nodes. From a distance, asparagus fern looks very soft or fluffy. This can be attributed to its fine, needle-like leaves. Flowers are white or pale pink and very fragrant, small and hardly noticeable. Flowering lasts for roughly two weeks during the summer. Fruit is bright red in color and contains 3 seeds per fruit. Birds are highly attracted to the fruit and aid in the dispersal of asparagus fern.

IMPACTS

Asparagus fern can be found spreading along roadsides and invading secondary forest systems. Colonies are readily formed which displace native vegetation and prevent native species from reestablishing. Asparagus fern has the potential to be similar to climbing asparagus, with the potential to smother the forest understory and prevent regeneration of canopy species.

MANAGEMENT

Preventative: The first step in preventative control of asparagus fern is to limit planting and intentional spread of the species. Removal of existing plants within the landscape should be practiced and, if possible, removal should occur before seeds are produced. Care must be exercised to prevent seed spread and dispersal during the removal process.

Cultural: Inform the public to refrain from purchasing, propagating, or planting asparagus fern due to the ability to escape from cultivation. Potted specimens used as outdoor houseplants may also spread the species, as the berries may be harvested by foraging birds.

Mechanical: Cutting provides some control, although application of an herbicide may be required to control resprouting. Completely remove all roots from the ground.

Biological: There are no known biological control programs for asparagus fern.

Chemical: Glyphosate at 1% solution with 0.25% surfactant has shown good control. Retreatment will probably be necessary to provide complete eradication. Other products may show activity but limited testing has occurred.

REFERENCES AND USEFUL LINKS:

Floridata Homepage: <http://www.floridata.com>

University of Florida Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants:
<http://aquat1.ifas.ufl.edu/welcome.html>

Langeland, K.A. and K. Craddock Burks. 1998. Identification and Biology of Non-Native Plants in Florida's Natural Areas. IFAS Publication SP 257. University of Florida, Gainesville. 165 pp.

The Plant Conservation Alliance's Alien Plant Working Group. Weeds Gone Wild: Alien Plant Invaders of Natural Areas: <http://www.nps.gov/plants/alien/index.htm>

Pacific Island Ecosystems at Risk (PIER). Plant Threats to Pacific Ecosystems:
<http://www.hear.org/pier/threats.htm>

Invasive Plants of the Eastern United States: <http://www.invasive.org>

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Plants Database: <http://plants.usda.gov>

Leaves & Stems

- Tiny spines along branches
- Needle-like branchlets clustered in nodes



Mature Plant

- Grows up to 2 feet in height and 6 feet in length
- Sprawling, smothering growth habit
- Fern-like appearance



Flowers

- Flowers are white or pale pink
- Fragrant and very small
- Very short flowering period in summer



Fruit

- Bright red berry
- Contains 3 seeds per fruit
- Birds readily eat, disperse seed through droppings

