Welcome to Rainbow Springs State Park — a place to experience Florida’s rich plant and animal life. While you’re here, we’d like to bring attention to some invasive plant species that are a serious ecological threat within this park and other natural areas throughout the state.

What Is An Invasive Plant?
Of the more than 4,000 plant species found in Florida, 1,300 or more are non-native* or exotic; they come from other countries or regions within the U.S. At least 130 of these exotic plants are spreading rapidly throughout our natural areas and private lands. When they cause environmental or economic harm, they are considered to be invasive.

So, What’s The Problem?
In their native ranges, plants generally do not become a nuisance. Today, with modern transportation, many exotic plants have caught a free ride to Florida. Once they arrive, they are free from natural enemies that existed in their home range (insects, diseases, etc.) and can outgrow and replace native plants.

When Invasive Plants Replace Native Plants:
- Native plants can be permanently eliminated, diminishing Florida’s natural diversity;
- Animals that use native plants are often unable to adapt, so they leave the area or die out;
- Invasive aquatic plants can completely fill the water column so that fish and wildlife are driven from the area.

Why Should We Care?
Invasive plants are costing Floridians a lot of money; nearly 80 million taxpayer dollars were spent in 2005 to control them. If not kept in check, invasive plants can create ideal breeding grounds for mosquitoes, cause serious navigation blockages, and major flooding problems during storms. Boating, swimming, hiking and other uses of natural areas can also be made difficult, even dangerous, by invasive plant infestations.

Keeping Things Under Control
After much research, we know that some invasive plant species will never be eradicated in Florida; they simply reproduce too fast. So now, the strategy is to keep infestations at the lowest feasible levels. This helps lessen overall environmental damage; it maintains habitat for native wildlife; and it keeps the plants from damaging bridges and flood control structures. It also reduces the total amount of herbicides needed over the long term.

Why Should You Know?
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Help Us Control Invasive Plants by Keeping Them Out of Your Landscape at Home
Preventing the introduction and spread of non-native plants in Florida is the most effective and least expensive means of protecting Florida’s natural habitats. Here are a few things we can all do:
- Learn to identify which plants are invasive, especially in your area.
- Volunteer to help remove invasive plants.
- Inspect your yard, woods, garden, or school for invasive plants; throw them in household trash (don’t compost).
- Practice good stewardship: never transport Florida’s plants to other areas and never empty your aquarium into a body of water, even a canal.
- Avoid chopping aquatic plants with boat propellers as some plant fragments can grow into new infestations.
- Remove plant matter from boats/trailers after use; check clothing and shoes for seeds.
- Ask your nursery or garden center for native and/or non-invasive plants.

Learn more about invasive plants:
http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/guide/invasplant.html

* Florida botanist, Richard Wunderlin, defines non-native plants as “those that have become part of the Florida flora following the occupation by European man.” In other words, if a plant was introduced after 1513, it is considered to be non-native.

Kudzu infestation
Water hyacinth on the St. John’s River, Palatka 1968

Kudzu infestation

STOP INVASIVE PLANTS

Rainbow Springs State Park
Dunnellon, Florida
www.floridastateparks.org/rainbowsprings
(352) 465-8555
Ardisia crenata
Introduced into Florida for ornament around 1900, coral ardisia has become naturalized in hardwood hammocks, including several areas in northern Florida. It can reach densities of 100-plus plants per square meter, reducing the already dim light of forest understories by an additional 70%, and potentially shading out native seedlings and ground cover.

Hydrilla verticillata
Hydrilla was introduced into Florida waters in 1960 and quickly spread to all drainage basins in the state by the early 1970s. By 1994 it was found in 43% of Florida’s public water bodies, with an estimated coverage of 95,000 acres. Hydrilla displaces native submerged plant communities, alters fish populations and affects water quality by growing in dense stands. Hydrilla infestations can also severely restrict boating, swimming, and fishing by the public.

Paederia foetida
Reportedly introduced from Asia in 1897 as a “potential fiber crop,” skunk vine now occurs throughout the southeastern United States. It prefers sunny floodplains and bottomlands, though it can grow underwater and high into trees in a variety of habitats, from moderately moist hammocks to dry sand hill communities. Skunk vine can create dense canopies that cause damage and even death to native vegetation. It has an unpleasant, musky odor.

Identifying Invasive Plants
The non-native plants in this brochure have proven to be invasive in our park and region and are currently being controlled by park staff, contractors and volunteers. Do you recognize any of them? Read on to learn more about these quiet invaders.

Dioscorea bulbifera
A vine introduced as an ornamental and food plant around 1905, air potato was already recognized as a pest plant throughout the state by the early 1970s. This “pretty plant” can quickly grow 60-70 feet — long enough to overtop and shade out tall trees. A member of the yam family, air potato vines produce large numbers of aerial potato-like growths which fall to the ground and grow into new vines. They are reported to be bitter when eaten raw and are not considered edible.

Imperata cylindrica
Cogon grass is considered one of the 10 worst weeds in the world and is reported by 73 countries as a pest in at least 35 crops. Native to warmer regions, it was brought into the U.S. as an experimental forage and as packing material. It is a serious weed of dry lands in Florida, but also occurs in places that become briefly flooded. It can cover large areas and has invaded the habitats of federally listed endangered and threatened native plant species.

Pistia stratiotes
Water lettuce may have been introduced to North America by natural means or by humans. Noted as early as 1774 by William Bartram, in “vast quantities ... several miles in length, and in some places a quarter of a mile in breadth” in the St. Johns River. Water lettuce is a free-floating plant with thick, ridged, downy leaves that resemble lettuce. It forms dense mats in lakes, rivers and canals.


Identify plants in your own neighborhood: http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/photocat.html