

# Weed alert

## Brazilian pepper

(*Schinus terebinthifolius*)



### Brazilian pepper

Brazilian pepper is a medium-sized evergreen shrub-like tree native to Brazil and Paraguay. It was first introduced during the 19th century and has invaded many habitats in Central and South Florida. This

small shrub-like tree, typically 15 to 30 feet in height, is the most widespread of Florida's nonnative invasive plant species occupying more than 700,000 acres. Although primarily an invader of landscapes in which the soil has been disturbed and fire excluded, it has formed large dense forests in relatively undisturbed areas adjacent to mangroves along the southwestern portion of Everglades National Park and within the coastal areas of West Central and South Florida.

Brazilian pepper is related to poisonwood, poison oak and poison ivy. This shrub-like tree produces dense clusters of small berries that change from green to bright red as they ripen. Local dispersal of this species is primarily by raccoons and opossums; long-distance spread is facilitated by fruit-eating birds, such as migratory American robins. Brazilian pepper berries have been reported to produce a narcotic or toxic effect on native birds and wildlife during some parts of the year.



Left: Understory of Brazilian pepper forest, illustrating the lack of native vegetation.



Right: Monospecific stand of Brazilian pepper in Everglades National Park.

### Environmental damage caused by Brazilian pepper forests:

- Brazilian pepper produces dense closed canopy forests that shade out almost all other plant life.
- Brazilian pepper forests alter natural fire regimes.
- Brazilian pepper forests are considered to be poor habitat for native wildlife species.
- Because of its relationship to poison ivy, many who come in contact with its sap develop allergic skin reactions.

**Because of its aggressive growth rate, never plant Brazilian pepper. Possession of Brazilian pepper with the intent to sell or plant is illegal in Florida without a special permit.**

### Why Brazilian pepper must be managed:

Brazilian pepper invasions represent a significant threat to Florida's native plant and wildlife populations. Typically, Brazilian pepper forms dense forests that exclude all other plant life by producing a dense closed canopy. These forests are considered to be poor habitat for native wildlife species and may negatively impact bird populations.



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## Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*)

This evergreen shrub-like tree, native to South America, is an aggressive invader of Florida's disturbed habitats, hammocks, pinelands, mangrove forests and canal banks.



**Leaves:** alternate, odd-pinnately compound with 3-11 (usually 7-9) leaflets, these elliptic-oblong, 2.5-5 cm (1-2 in) long, with upper surfaces dark green (lateral veins obvious, lighter in color), lower surfaces paler, and leaflet margins often somewhat toothed. Leaves aromatic when crushed, smelling peppery or like turpentine.



**Stems:** medium shrub-like tree 15 to 30 ft. tall; short trunk gives way to long, intertwining branches.



**Flowers:** unisexual (dioecious), small, in short-branched clusters at leaf axils of current-season stems; five petals, white to 2 mm long.



**Fruit:** berry-like; clusters are glossy green, ripening to bright red; seed dark brown, 1/8 in. in diameter.



Illustration courtesy of  
Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants,  
University of Florida

### Look for first:

- compound leaves
- small white flower clusters
- berry-like fruit clusters, glossy green, matures to bright red

### Distribution

Origin in Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay; widely established in Central and South Florida.



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