

The Invaders Among Us By Larry Figart

When I think of the term “alien invader” I think of it as a plot of a science fiction story. Unfortunately it is an issue we are dealing with every day. You may be asking what does alien invader have to do with our Florida landscapes and why is Larry writing about it. Unfortunately Florida is being invaded by an alien of a different sort. The invaders are invasive plants. You may wonder what does “invasive plant” mean? The University of Florida defines an invasive plant as **“an introduced plant that causes harm to the environment, the economy, and/or human health. Often displacing native species, these invaders skew the delicate balance between animals, plants, and important processes such as water flow and fire”**. In other words it is a plant that does not naturally occur in our area and causes great harm to the environment by spreading uncontrollably and displacing native plants. The invasive plant most of us are aware of is Kudzu, a vine that envelops acres and acres of forest and shades it out.



Coral Ardisia Photo by Chris Evans, Bugwood.org

While a weed is any plant growing in a place where it’s not wanted, an invasive weed has the potential to cause widespread change to the natural ecosystem. While all invasive plants are non-native, not all non-native plants are invasive. An example of this would be the camellia bush. It has been a staple in our landscape for many

years. It is native to Asia, yet has not been documented as spreading into natural ecosystems in Florida. Fortunately, most of the non-native trees and plants we use in our landscapes are not invasive. However, there are many trees and plants commonly found in our landscapes that are listed as invasive.

For this reason, the control of invasive plants starts in our own back (and front) yards. It is important that we know what is growing in our landscapes and determine if they are invasive or not. The University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences has an easy to use tool that can help us find out if the landscape plant we are growing could be invasive.

This tool is called the UF/IFAS Assessment of Non-native Plants. It can be found online at <http://assessment.ifas.ufl.edu>. It is easy to use and can help us identify the invasive risk of many trees and plants.

The Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council (FLEPPC) is a non-profit organization that maintains its own list of invasive plants. The list can be found at <http://www.fleppc.org>. Some invasive landscape trees and shrubs that are very common include: Chinese Tallow, mimosa, and Chinese privet.

So you may be asking “what can I do?” The answer is easy. In order to stop the spread of invasive plants in Florida it is important that we remove invasive plants from our landscape.

Removing non-native invasive plants from our yards can eliminate a major source of invasion into natural areas. While the removal of these plants may be seen as a burden, the value of removing these invaders remains for years as a benefit to Florida’s environment.

Most invasive plants can simply be pulled out of the ground and removed. Stumps of trees that are cut down can be treated with an herbicide to keep it from re-sprouting. Invasive plants can be replaced by plants that are native or with non-native plants that are not invasive. The University of Florida even has a publication that lists alternatives to invasive plants that includes plants that have a similar appearance. This publication is listed as ENH1206 and can be found online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/EP/EP46700.pdf>.

Perhaps if you have already eliminated the invasive plants in your yard, you can help tackle invasive plants on our public lands. Many local parks have opportunities such as invasive removal work days. By identifying, and removing invasive plants in Florida we are contributing to the long term preservation of our natural areas.



Chinese Tallow