

News from the Watershed

Exotics: What's so bad about exotic plants in our state? Plenty

Exotics, also called invasive or non-native plants, are a huge problem in Florida. Many folks think that all plants are “good” and if they are pretty, so much the better. That's why it is important to understand the nature of native vs. non-native plants. You could be hurting the environment around you just by trying to make your area look beautiful.

An exotic plant is one that has been introduced from outside of its native range. Sometimes this is on purpose and other times it is quite by accident. An invasive exotic plant is a plant that was brought here and likes the area so much that it is taking over. The invasive exotic will expand into natural areas and disrupt the natural balance and choke out the native plants.

Even though all plants make oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide, they need to grow in the areas where they originated. You see, plants, and in their native areas are subject to conditions such as weather, disease, insects and animals that keep them in balance. When they are brought to other areas, these natural conditions may not keep them in check and they may not have any natural enemies in their new environment. Therefore, they just keep growing and spreading until they take over. Then the other plants and animals that live in that area may either die or leave. Animals may depend on native plants for their diet and native plants may literally be “choked” out by the other exotic vegetation as it continually grows.

In Florida, according to the University of South Florida, almost one-third of the plants growing wild are non-native. Some of these species are causing extreme problems such as Lygodium (Old World climbing fern), Melaleuca, Cogon Grass, Hydrilla and Kudzu. These invasive plants can spread through wind, water, expanding root systems or birds and wildlife that eat the seeds and spread them through droppings.

Once the exotic plants begin to “take over” an area, control of them on land and in the water is extremely costly. Taxpayers are spending millions of dollars to control these pests each year. These exotics impact natural areas and may cause declining numbers of wildlife as well as native plants. In addition, navigation on waterways has become problematic in many areas as these plants are covering up the surface water and even the areas below the surface in many cases, such as hydrilla. So you see, these plants are not “good” for our native, natural balance.

The problem seems so huge that you may ask yourself, what can I do about it? Actually, there are several things you can do. Start at home, instead of purchasing non-native plants for your yard, buy attractive native species. If you can't live with that, buy non-invasive exotics that won't spread. If you do have invasive exotics in your yard, remove them and replace them with one of the other types. Make sure that when you are boating, you remove any vegetation that may have stuck on your propeller or other areas so as not to spread that plant to another waterway. Never empty your aquarium into a lake or river

or other wetland. Instead of spreading exotic plants, spread the word and get your neighbors and children involved.