

Melaleuca mulch: The solution to an invasive exotic problem.

The melaleuca is a wonderful tree when it's in Australia. In the land down under it is often used as a street tree or planted in public parks and gardens. In addition, it is used for windbreaks and a food source for local insects and birds. Throughout history, the Aboriginies have utilized the melaleuca in many ways. The young leaves were chewed to alleviate headaches and other health problems. In addition, the bark and inner parts of the trunk have been used as bandages, mats and material, cooking wraps and linings in canoes. In today's times, the oil from the tree is used in health tonics, salves, and medications. Unfortunately, in the natural areas of Florida, it has become a very problematic pest.

As with most exotic species, the melaleuca has no natural enemies in Florida. Therefore, it grows unchecked in many areas. The tree is known for its capacity to withstand floods and droughts. The plant was introduced to the sunshine state in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was brought here for the purpose of drying out swampy land and as ornamental garden plants. The tree has certainly done its share of drying up wetlands and has invaded countless acres of saw grass marshes, wet pine flatwoods, cypress swamps and other plant communities. It outcompetes the native vegetation because no native animal will feed on it. The tree may invade to the point that it becomes a monoculture and will eventually form an ecological wasteland.

Wildlife that depends on Florida's vegetative diversity is displaced or dies as a result of the invasion of these trees. Some of the species that have already been affected include the endangered Cape Sable seaside sparrow, wood stork, red-cockaded woodpecker and the Florida panther. Other species that depend on these valuable natural plant communities for their survival also suffer as a result of a lack of food, shelter and habitat.

Florida has spent over \$35 million to control this pest. The economic impact of these trees to recreational lands results in the loss of millions of dollars a year. They have displaced native vegetation on over 390,000 acres in the southern part of Florida. According to Wikipedia Encyclopedia, "its unchecked expansion in South Florida is one of the most serious threats to the integrity of the native ecosystem. Melaleuca causes severe ecological impacts, including displacing native species, modification of hydrology, alteration of soil resources, reducing native habitat value and changing the fire regime."

There is something that each one of us can do to help in the fight against the spread of these invasive exotic pests. We can buy melaleuca mulch! The commercial mulch is composted for 90 days before packaging, which kills the seeds. So there is no danger of spreading it by purchasing the mulch. In addition, it is said to be "some of the most environmentally-friendly and termite-resistant mulch on the market."(USDA)

Perhaps one of the best benefits of choosing melaleuca over cypress mulch is that by doing so, thousands of beautiful, native cypress trees will be spared. The enormous amounts of cypress mulch produced each year threaten the survival of this native Florida tree important for flood control, wildlife habitat and water purity. By purchasing alternative mulches, we become part of the solution, not part of the problem.

It seems that the melaleuca mulch isn't a big seller mainly because people are accustomed to using the cypress mulch. But why not give melaleuca a try? If each one of us would choose melaleuca mulch in the future, we would be saving countless cypress trees, more melaleuca trees would be harvested, thereby reducing their population, and we would still have beautiful gardens.

“Forestry Resources created the FloriMulch product (melaleuca mulch) as a method of eliminating the melaleuca tree and finding a practical use for it. Melaleuca mulch is an environmentally friendly alternative to cypress mulch. All FloriMulch products feature an endorsement from *The Friends of the Florida Everglades*, leaders in the crusade to save the National Park's native environment, which is threatened by the melaleuca tree.

It serves a practical use of controlling weeds, reducing watering, and protecting roots. In addition, recent studies suggest it is termite resistant. Preliminary research conducted at the University of Florida suggests termites survived better and consumed more mulch made up of pine and cypress sapwoods. However, they did not survive with a strict melaleuca diet. In addition, Forestry Resources has developed a curing process that raises the temperature of the mulch to 140 degrees, which eliminates burrowing nematodes and weed seed germination. In fact, FloriMulch is the only melaleuca mulch product earning a state certification as nematode free.” (Forestry Resources)

Consider using this environmentally friendly alternative to other mulches and help get rid of this pesky tree. Ask your local suppliers to provide the melaleuca mulch and try it out on your gardens. You just might be surprised and even see an improvement in your landscaping. To purchase melaleuca mulch on line visit <http://www.gomulch.com/index.cfm/name-arsenicfree> and you'll be on your way to a healthier garden!