

The third Workshop on Florida's invasive, exotic plants and animals will be held on November 20th at the Sebring Civic Center.

By: Corine Burgess

Florida is plagued by many invasive, exotic species of plants and animals. Air potato is among the plants that are of main concern. This plant will take over a vacant lot in a matter of months and grows about 8" per day. Air Potato is just one of the many exotic species that will be covered in the upcoming workshop on November 20th at 1:00 p.m. at the Sebring Civic Center near the library. The Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District will hold a workshop on Florida's invasive, exotic plants and animals. This will be the third of four presentations designed to educate citizens about the problems that these species cause to our environment. When participants leave, they should be able to identify various exotic species and understand why they are a problem. Instructions on how to receive a free, native plant during the Air Potato Exchange Day scheduled for January will also be available.

Exotic species have arrived in Florida in different ways. Some have been introduced accidentally and others brought here intentionally. Accidental imports have arrived as contaminants in bales and cartons of valid agricultural and freight shipments. Some arrived in the ballast water of old sailing ships. Some deliberate imports came in as ornamentals, some for erosion control, and some for the aquarium trade. Others were smuggled in. Many exotics came in before we had import regulations or recognized invasive species as problems.

These menaces are biological pollutants. Invasive exotics are responsible for destroying more natural habitat each year than is destroyed through land development. Highly invasive exotic species severely disrupt native ecosystems and often times totally displace native species. Plants and animals that don't belong in Florida are eliminating and altering natural habitat for wildlife. These plants and animals compete for food and space thereby displacing the native plants and animals.

Not only are our natural areas being destroyed by these aggressive monsters, exotic removal costs millions of dollars a year in tax payer dollars. According to ecologists from Cornell University, these invaders cost the United States about \$123 billion a year in economic losses. If anything, the estimates made in the damage assessment study, *Environmental and Economic Costs Associated with Non-indigenous Species in the United States*, are conservative. More than 40 percent of species on the U.S. Department of the Interior's endangered or threatened species lists are at risk primarily because of non-indigenous species--and a price tag cannot be placed on their loss.

Here's your chance to find out more about these invasive aggressors. Come to the workshop scheduled for November 20th at the Sebring Civic Center. You'll learn about many of the invasive species that are a problem in Highlands County. You'll receive free handouts and information about some of these species and have a chance to win a beautiful native plant as a door prize. The plants that will be given away at the workshops and at the exchange day in January are provided by Lord's Farm Nursery. There will also be refreshments and the workshop is free. What have you got to lose?

Find out how you will be able to receive a free native plant in January during our Air Potato Exchange Day. The funds to purchase the hundreds of native plants that will be given away next year, came from a grant from the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council – Kathy Craddock Burks education grant. The idea behind the project is to get you, the citizens of our beautiful county, involved in the exotic species problem and to become part of the solution. By planting native and removing exotics, you will be actively taking part in helping the environment you live in. You can be part of the solution by helping to remove them and also get your friends, neighbors, kids and grandkids involved and start helping native species to survive.

For more information give us a call at (863)402-6545 or visit our website at www.highlandsswcd.org.