

Air Potato Exchange Day is finally here

For the past 4 months, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District has offered workshops on invasive exotic species of plants and animals. The goal of these workshops was to educate citizens about this huge problem. Now, at last, the day is near for the free plants to be offered to all who care to participate. The Air Potato Exchange Day is scheduled for January 9th from 10:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. All that is required is a minimum of one bag of air potato bulbs to trade for a free native plant.

Exotic plants and animals are species that have come from other areas and do not belong in the area they are now in. Invasive species are the subset of introduced species that have a negative impact on the ecosystem or cause economic damage.

Folks who attended the workshops know how to identify the air potato vine as well as other exotic species that were discussed. Air Potato is a particularly troublesome plant that is invading our beautiful county. A native of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, *Dioscorea bulbifera* (scientific name) was first introduced to Florida in 1905. It is a member of the yam family and it is speculated that it was brought into the Americas with slave ships from Africa. Since those early days, air potato has spread throughout Florida and it is also found in Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Hawaii and Puerto Rico. It is considered one of the most serious exotic plant invaders in the state. Therefore, it is illegal to propagate, transport or possess. Due to its ability to displace native species and disrupt natural processes such as fire and water flow, air potato has been listed as one of Florida's most invasive plant species since 1993, and was placed on the Florida Noxious Weed List by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in 1999.

Air potato invades a variety of natural areas in Florida including pinelands and hammocks. It rapidly grows to the tops of tree canopies and forms a vine mat which weighs down and shades native vegetation. Once air potato invades an area, it is difficult to eliminate due to the prolific production of aerial tubers. Air potato can grow extremely quickly, roughly 8 inches per day. New plants develop from bulbils (little potato like objects) that form on the plant and these bulbils serve as a means of dispersal. The aerial stems of air potato die back in the winter, but resprouting occurs from bulbils and underground tubers. The primary means of spread and reproduction are via bulbils. The smallest bulbils make control of air potato difficult due to their ability to sprout at a very small stage.

Invasives cause an estimated \$137 billion per year in losses in the United States alone. In addition, the effects of invasives on native species are staggering; of the 958 species listed under the Endangered Species Act as threatened or endangered, approximately 400 are at risk due to invasive species (Wilcove *et al* 1998). Control of invasive species is expensive and at times very difficult; therefore the most effective and least expensive way to control invasions is to prevent them. Everyday decisions made by ordinary citizens are critical in the fight against these pests.

The Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council has awarded Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) a grant to help reduce the amount of this problematic plant in Highlands County. On January 9th, the "Air Potato Exchange Day" will take place at the Ag Center in Sebring. From 10:00 a.m. through 2:00 p.m., just bring in a bag (or more) of air potato bulbs and you can drive away with one of the hundreds of beautiful plants.

The free native plants will include Milkweed, Porterweed, Beautyberry, Carolina Jasmine, Dwarf Firebush, Simpson Stopper, Ilex Shilling, Walter's Vibernum, Wax Myrtle, Muhly Grass, Red Maple, Oak trees, and Bald Cypress. Participants will have the option of choosing any one of these plants in exchange for a minimum of one bag of bulbs. Also, prizes will be offered for the biggest, smallest, most unique and most (by pounds) air potato bulbs.

Here is a great way to get involved, give our environment some much needed help and get a free plant in the process. For more information give me a call at (863) 402-6545.