

First workshop on invasive exotics in Florida was a great beginning to an ongoing problem.

On September 18th, 40 concerned citizens gathered at the Bert J. Harris Agriculture Center to learn about some of the problem plants and animals that are invading our beautiful state.

Although the fast growing air potato vine was the main focus, many other plants and animals that are a threat to our natural surroundings were also covered. Attendees walked away with a better understanding and knowledge of why these species are so dangerous to the environment and some of the steps they can take to help out with this ongoing challenge.

The attendees of the workshop asked intelligent questions and saw, first hand, what a problem these species are causing in our community. According to some of the comments, many citizens are already taking action and removing these species around their property. Others have reported sightings of exotic species in their area to the proper agencies. The goal is to educate folks and enable them to identify exotics and take part in being part of the solution to this monumental problem.

Thanks to a grant from the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council (FLEPPC)– Kathy Craddock Burks Education Grant, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) is able to purchase hundreds of native plants to exchange for bags of exotic air potato bulbs at the upcoming Air Potato Exchange Day. FLEPPC's mission is to support the management of invasive exotic plants in Florida's natural areas by providing a forum for the exchange of scientific, educational and technical information. By providing funds to purchase native plants, the HSWCD has the opportunity to educate and inform the citizens of Highlands County about the problems that these exotic pests are causing.

The four workshops that are being held at the Agriculture Center are designed to do just that. These seminars are an opportunity for the public to learn about and identify some of the invasive species in our area. The workshops are leading up to the grand finale of the Air Potato Exchange Day, which will be held on January 9th from 10:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. All you have to do is bring in at least one grocery sized bag of air potato bulbs and we'll give you a beautiful, native plant.

The workshops are informative, fun and you could walk away with a nice plant for your garden. There is no charge and refreshments are supplied. So, what have you got to lose? The next workshop is scheduled for October 16th at 1:00 p.m. at the Agriculture Center.

The plants are being purchased from Lord's Farm Nursery and there will be over 20 varieties available. Whether you want a tree, shrub, ground cover or flowering plant, you will find something beautiful for your garden and landscape. Because of the generosity of the nursery owners, gorgeous native plants are offered at each workshop as door prizes.

Each plant that will be offered at the Exchange Day is featured in these weekly articles. If you are curious and have missed some of the issues, visit our website at www.highlandsswcd.org. On the left side of the home page click on News from the Watershed and a list of article links will come up. You can find out about the different varieties and which one is right for your yard.

These invasive exotic plants and animals are impacting all of our lives. They are taking over many natural areas and even affecting us in the comfort of our homes. Recently, transformers have been blown because of the air potato creeping up the power line poles and shorting them out when it rained, causing electrical outages in those areas. The fast growing vine not only covers trees and plants, it encroaches on fences, structures, signs and any other object that is located in its path.

Take part in the elimination of these invaders. Learn about these exotic species and get involved in their removal. For more information on invasive, exotic plants, visit FLEPPC's website at <http://www.fleppc.org/index.cfm>. We hope to see you at the next workshop.