

Tame your exotic side: become native

Anyone who loves to garden most likely wants to have plants that are attractive. Some of the plants that may be the most appealing plants to gardeners are not native. There's nothing wrong with putting in non-native or exotic species of plants in your garden if they are not invasive and are able to thrive in Florida's soils and climate. Those plants are called "Florida Friendly." Some exotics, such as air potato are a problem because it is difficult, if not impossible, to control their spread. But, when possible, it's always a good idea to plant native plants; generally they will grow better because they are adapted to our soils and weather and you don't have to worry about them getting out of control.

There are many very attractive species of native plants including flowering species. If you're like me, you can never have too many flowers in your yard. Here's the great news! Next year on January 9th, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District will hold an "Air Potato Exchange Day." The reason this is good news to you gardeners is that by bringing in a bag of air potato bulbs, you will receive a free native plant.

Thanks to a Florida's Exotic Pest Plant Council grant, there will be a huge variety of plants to choose from including trees, shrubs, ground cover and flowering plants. The plants will be supplied by The Lord's Farm Nursery, which is located in Lake Placid. After visiting the nursery, I am confident that no matter what type of plant you may be looking for to plant in your garden, you will find something that will please you.

Plants that will be available will include Milkweed, Porter Weed, Galardia, Beauty Berry, Carolina Jasmine, Dwarf Firebush, Simpson Stopper, Coonti, Ilex Shilling, Vibernum, Holly, Wax Myrtle, Muley Grass, Red Maple, Oak, Bald Cypress and Everglades Palm. There will be something for everyone. Many of the plants are attractive to butterflies and will certainly add to the beauty of your landscaping.

In order to receive your free native plant, you will need to bring in at least one grocery bag full of air potato bulbs on January 9th. If you don't know what air potato is, don't worry. The Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District will be holding workshops in the winter months to educate you about the plant and why it is essential to eradicate it in our neighborhoods.

There will also be great prizes offered for the biggest air potato bulb, the smallest air potato bulb, the most (in pounds) air potato bulbs and the most uniquely shaped air potato bulb. So, it promises to be a fun day with free plants and the possibility of winning a great prize!

In an effort to familiarize you with some of the species of plants that will be offered, I thought I'd write a series of articles on each one. That way you can know, before hand, which plant is right for you.

So let's talk about milkweed. Milkweeds are perennial plants, which means an individual plant lives for more than one year, growing each spring from rootstock and seeds rather than seeds alone. The leaves are opposite, simple broad ovate-lanceolate, 2 – 5 inches long and 1-4 inches broad, usually with an undulate margin and a red-colored main vein. They have a very short petiole and a velvety underside.

The flowers are grouped in several spherical umbels with numerous flowers in each umbel. The individual flowers are small, $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter, perfumed, with five corneate hoods. The seeds are attached to long, white flossy hairs and encased in large follicles. Milkweed is named

for its milky juice, which contains alkaloids, latex, and several other complex compounds including cardenolides. Some species are known to be toxic.

An important nectar source for bees and other insects, milkweed is also a larval food source for monarch butterflies and their relatives, as well as a variety of other herbivorous insects (including numerous beetles, moths, and true bugs) specialized to feed on the plants despite their chemical defenses. When Monarch larvae ingest milkweed, they also ingest the plants' toxins, called cardiac glycosides. They sequester these compounds in their wings and exoskeletons, making the larvae and adults toxic to many potential predators. Many predators may avoid Monarchs because they learn that the larvae and adults taste bad and/or make them vomit.

Being the sole food source of Monarch Butterfly larva, the plant is often used in Butterfly gardening. It is a very attractive plant and adds to the beauty of most any garden.