

## Air Potato Exchange Day; The Sequel

If you didn't get a chance to bring in a bag of air potato bulbs to exchange for a free native plant, don't worry, we're giving you another chance. Even if you did receive your free plant, here's your chance to get another one! During the Air Potato Exchange Day on January 9<sup>th</sup>, plenty of native plants were given away. But, there are lots more plants left, enough in fact to hold another "exchange." So start collecting bulbs again and bring in those bags to exchange for a free plant during the week of February 1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup>.

The rules are simple. Collect a minimum of one grocery bag of air potato bulbs and bring them to the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District Office located on George Blvd. located in the Agriculture Center. Once we receive your potato bulbs, you get to pick out one of the many beautiful, native plants that remain. But remember you can only get one plant no matter how many bags you bring in!

There are a lot of reasons to pick up these bulbs other than to receive a free plant. Did you know that every single one of the potato bulbs starts another vine? No matter how big or how small the bulb, the vine will be hearty and healthy come spring time. These vines choke out native plants because they completely consume the vegetation they grow on. Pine trees, palmettos and any other native plant that is in their path will eventually be smothered and killed by these aggressive invaders.

Air Potato, *Dioscorea bulbifera*, is a vine that came from Asia. It was introduced to Florida in 1905 and since its arrival, has taken over many native ecosystems. It has the ability to displace native species and disrupt the natural processes of nature such as fire and water flow. It is currently listed as one of Florida's most invasive plant species and is on the Florida Noxious Weed List. It grows about eight inches a day and climbs up to the top of trees. It forms a vine mat which weighs down and shades the plants in its path. Once it gets in to an area, it is difficult to eliminate due to the potato type bulbs that continually drop to the ground.

Right now is the perfect time to collect the bulbs because they have fallen to the ground because of all of the freezes we have recently experienced. The green foliage has died back and it is easy to spot the bulbs among the leaf litter. Remember, every bulb you pick up is one less deadly vine that will invade our natural plant communities.

We have a variety of beautiful plants to choose from including Carolina Jasmine, Ilex Schilling, Porterweed, Dwarf fire bush, Simpson Stopper, Walter's Viburnum, Muhly grass, Butterfly bush, Bald Cypress, Red Maple, and Laurel Oaks.

The reason the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District is able to give these plants away is because of a grant from the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council – Kathy Craddock Burks education grant. The funds they awarded our agency were used to purchase hundreds of native plants to give away in exchange for air potato bulbs.

So far the program has been a great success. We are hopeful that we can repeat this program again next year. Our number one goal is to educate citizens about the problem so that we can all work together to tackle this growing problem. We were excited and pleased with the participation and enthusiasm of the citizens that participated in the event. Many folks requested that we do this program every year. Some enjoyed the experience and even got their kids and grandchildren involved. It's comforting to know that so many citizens are taking action to protect our environment.

For more information on how to receive your free plant or if you want to get involved in joining a neighborhood task force to eliminate invasive exotic plants in your area, please give me a call at (863) 402-6545.