

Tame your exotic side – plant native!

By: Corine E. Burgess

Braving low temperatures and icy rain, many Highlands County citizens came out to do some trading on January 9th. “Tame your exotic side – plant native” was the theme of the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District’s (HSWCD) “Air Potato Exchange Day.” Folks were encouraged to bring in a minimum of 1 bag of air potato bulbs and exchange it for a free native plant. Many varieties, shapes and sizes of native plants were offered thanks to the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council’s Kathy Craddock Burks Education Grant. The funds allowed HSWCD to purchase over 200 plants for the exchange.

Even though the weather was wet and gloomy, staff and volunteers began to show up in front of the Bert J. Harris Agriculture Center at around 8:30 a.m. They knew the truck, with over 200 native plants was there and needed to be unloaded. Donned in raincoats, hats, gloves and plenty of warm clothing, the volunteers, along with staff members got to work unloading the truck. Once the plants were off of the truck and in place, everyone seemed to be of the same mind. There probably wouldn’t be much of a turn out on such a cold and wet day.

But a little bad weather didn’t stop our brave citizens and they came out despite the elements. The first customer of the day was Ray Drury, a friendly guy who had collected a whopping 70 pounds of potatoes. He was excited about the event and said there were plenty more bulbs where those came from. Throughout the day, many folks were educated, had lots of great questions, took home informative literature and asked if this would be an annual event. The citizens who showed up included old and young alike. Mr. Pendarvis, the grandpa of the two young tykes who collected the most bulbs, stated, “I had my grandkids out there with me every day for 2 weeks collecting these bulbs.”

When the event finished at 2:00 p.m., over 1,000 pounds of air potato bulbs had been collected and hundreds of native plants had been given away. It was encouraging to see the good folks of Highlands County not only take such ownership in the natural resources, but to come out in such horrendous weather to join in the exchange day.

The following Monday, judges gathered together to decide on the most (by pounds), largest, smallest and most unique air potatoes. Prizes were awarded to the winners: The Pendarvis family won for the most air potatoes collected; a whopping 189 pounds. Ray Drury won for the most unique potato, which looked like a face. Two awards were given out for the smallest bulb. Each one was so small that it was difficult to tell which one was the tiniest, each looking about like a grain of sand. Those 2 prizes went to Joyce Quiel and Patty Lloyd. Finally, the largest potato award was given to Susan Volpitta; her bulb was huge and weighed in at 1 pound 10.9 ozs.

Leading up to the January 9th event were 4 workshops held from September through December. The seminars were designed to educate people about how harmful and dangerous invasive, exotics are to our natural environment. Many types of plants and even animals were discussed at the workshops, but the main focus was air potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*). Door prizes were awarded to attendees and lots of handouts were available.

Air potato invades a variety of natural areas in Florida including pinelands and hammocks. It grows roughly 8 inches per day and climbs to the tops of trees and forms a mat that weighs down and shades the native plants in its path. Once it gets a hold of an area, it is difficult to get it out. New plants develop from bulbils (little potato like objects) that form on the plant and these bulbils serve as a means of dispersal. Even though the stems and foliage of the vine die back in the winter, the plant is still dangerous because of these bulbils. Each time the vine drops a “potato” or bulb, another plant grows from it. Once the potatoes fall and are buried under the soil and leaf litter, they are difficult to see and dig up. Even a potato the size of a pea will start a new plant, which is one of the reasons this invasive exotic is so difficult to control. Getting these bulbs off the ground is a good start to eliminating this invader of our natural world.

As with any successful event, the team of folks that put it all together and came through even though it was really cold, are the ones who deserve the credit. Without the help of the Ridge Rangers, Earth Team volunteers, and HSWCD staff the event would certainly not have gone as smoothly. Special thanks to Ridge Rangers Jeanne Gossman, Patty Lloyd, Kenneth Merop and Daniel Wilson. Earth Team volunteers included Edward Cunningham, Eric Maron, Gerald and Pat Hibbs. The participating staff from the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District included Corine Burgess, Jackie Bailey and Clell Ford.

This is the first time that an air potato exchange has been attempted in Highlands County and it was so successful, that it is our hope that we will be able to make it an annual event. If we can continue to educate the citizens, motivate them with free plants, get them excited about competitions and cleaning up their environment, perhaps we can truly make a difference and put a stop to or at least slow down these aggressive invaders!