

Volunteers take on the invaders of Florida  
By: Corine Burgess

Hopefully Highlands County's residents are aware of the exotic plant and animal problem we are facing these days. For the past several months, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) staff has been doing their part to get word out about some of the invaders that threaten many areas in our county. By holding 4 workshops, having the "Air Potato Exchange Day", giving away free native plants for bags of bulbs collected, and news media, we are hopeful that citizens have become more aware of the huge problem that faces all of us.

Highlands County isn't the only place that has been taking action to combat these pesky invaders. During "National Invasive Species Awareness Week," January 10<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup>, many other organizations and volunteers got their hands dirty in an effort to help out. Exotic pests are everywhere. Most of Florida is plagued by varying species of plants and animals that don't belong in the sunshine state. Fortunately, as people are educated about the harm that these species cause our environment, they are taking action and doing something about the problem.

In Bradford County, the Cooperative Weed Management Area held their first annual Air Potato Roundup. They collected 250 pounds of bulbs. They are using the collected specimens for research. The Southwest Florida Cooperative Invasive Species Management Areas (CISMA) held a work day where 600 pounds of air potato bulbs were collected and disposed of. In the Lower Wekiva River Preserve State Park another "first" air potato raid was held by the Central Florida CISMA and over 700 pounds were collected. The same group also collected a whopping 9,480 pounds of the pesky bulbs for their Disney's give a day, get a day event. Over 6,000 pounds were collected from the First Coast Invasive Species Working Group at their 4<sup>th</sup> Annual First Coast Air Potato Round-up. Finally, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District collected over 1,000 pounds on January 9<sup>th</sup> at the first Highlands County Air Potato Exchange Day. We continue to collect the bulbs as people bring them in to exchange for a free native plant. All totaled the HSWCD has collected over 1,500 pounds of air potato bulbs.

Totaled up, over 19,000 pounds of air potato bulbs were collected in a very short amount of time mostly by volunteers. This just goes to show that a handful of people can make a huge difference. Because of these environmentally minded folks, almost 20,000 air potato vines will not be in existence to take over the natural areas where the bulbs were collected.

Air potato, *Dioscorea bulbifera*, is a native of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. It is a member of the yam family and grows about 8 inches per day. Each potato that it drops starts a new plant. It has spread throughout most of the areas in Florida rapidly. It is considered one of the most serious exotic plant invaders in the state because of 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.

Unfortunately, air potato is only one of hundreds of invasive, exotic species in our beautiful state. There are many types of plants and animals that are literally taking over our natural areas. But there is hope. As people have shown in just the month of January alone, each individual can

and will make a difference. If you would like to find out more about exotic species, visit <http://www.fleppc.org/> or give us a call at (863) 402-6545 to become involved in a task force to fight these plants in your neighborhood.