

Lygodium is considered the greatest invasive exotic threat to Florida  
By: Corine Burgess

We've all read stories about alien creatures taking over the planet and smothering everything in their paths. These fictional aliens come in all shapes, sizes and forms. Sometimes though, as the saying goes, "truth is stranger than fiction." This may well be the case with the invasive exotic vines *Lygodium Microphyllum* and *Lygodium Japonicum*. Lygodium is considered the greatest threat, as far as invasive exotics go, to our beautiful state.

These two species of Lygodium, commonly called Old World Climbing Fern and Japanese Climbing Fern, should simply not be in Florida. It is believed that they were intentionally brought here in the early and mid 1900's for ornamental purposes. These invaders of our natural areas make themselves at home in various plant communities such as pine flatwoods, wet prairies, sawgrass marshes, mangrove communities, and floodplains. They grow into the trees and shade out any other plants that are present. They literally smother and suffocate everything in their path.

Old World climbing fern can actually resprout from each leaf. Some of the leaves produce spores along their margins, which eventually result in new plants and so on and so on. The rapid and explosive growth of these ferns is cause for serious concern. The plant grows quickly and spreads to far away areas because of the microscopic air-borne spores that float freely to their new destinations. These ferns threaten our wetland communities and cause serious safety concerns regarding wildfire.

Fire is a natural occurrence in many plant communities. If Lygodium is present it alters the fire behavior. Because the fern grows fronds that can reach over 100 feet in length, it tends to climb up tall trees. These long lengths of fern serve as ladders to carry the fire into the tops of the trees causing a catastrophic fire. When fire reaches the tops or canopy of the trees it can jump from one plant community to another. Many fire dependent species of trees such as Slash Pine would normally survive the fire's heat, however when the fire gets into the crown of the tree it will most certainly cause its demise.

As far as wildlife is concerned, the plant is a menace. Species such as the Florida black bear, wood stork and Sherman's fox squirrel are all threatened by the rapid growth of this plant in their habitats. The food these creatures need to survive as well as shelter is literally smothered out due to the blanketing effect of the vine.

Both Old World and Japanese Climbing ferns are true ferns. They are perennial and vine like because of their ability to climb up surfaces. Old World climbing fern is native to wet tropical and subtropical regions of Asia, Africa, India, Australia and the Pacific to Tahiti. Japanese climbing fern is native to temperate and tropical Asia. Because of Florida's tropical climate and fertile soil, both varieties of fern are becoming more widespread.

Residents of Highlands County are fortunate to have some of the most beautiful natural areas in the state. One such area is the Sun 'n Lakes Wildlife Preserve. This 1,350 acre parcel is located

at the end of Sun 'n Lakes Boulevard in Sebring. This majestic natural area consists of a complex mosaic of natural communities. The site consists of mesic, wet and scrubby flatwoods, dome swamps, seepage streams, and cypress swamps. Passive recreation such as biking and hiking are the activities allowed on the property.

Unfortunately, like many other pristine areas in Florida, Lygodium has reared its ugly head on the property. However, because of Highlands County's Department of Parks and Natural Resources Invasive Weed Control team, a battle is being fought. Danny Copeland and Rich Haley, Weed Control Technicians have been taking on the green alien on the Sun 'n Lakes Preserve property.

In November, the crew sprayed hundreds of Lygodium plants and will continually monitor the areas to make sure the plants don't resprout. Fortunately, they are on the constant look out for these green monsters. A monthly routine maintenance plan is in place to ensure the Preserve doesn't get taken over by these exotic pests as well as many other species.

Many other agencies such as The Nature Conservancy, the United States Department of Agriculture, and Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council are fighting the good fight in an effort to attack this invasive pest. Although the battle seems almost hopeless at times, its good to know that there are so many agencies and groups that are banding together to protect our natural resources.