

Workshop on Florida's invasive, exotic plants and animals is coming on September 18th.

On September 18th at 1:00 p.m. at the Agriculture Center in Sebring, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District will hold a workshop on Florida's invasive, exotic plants and animals. This will be the first of four presentations designed to educate citizens about the problems that these species cause to our environment. The program will focus mainly on air potato, which is a highly invasive vine that is taking over areas in Highlands County. Other exotic species will also be covered and when participants leave, they should be able to identify various exotic species and understand why they are a problem. Instructions on how to receive a free, native plant during the Air Potato Exchange Day scheduled for January will also be available.

The funds to purchase the hundreds of native plants that will be given away in January, came from a grant from the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council – Kathy Craddock Burks education grant. The idea behind the project is to get you, the citizens of our beautiful county, involved in the exotic species problem and to become part of the solution. The main focus of the workshop will be an exotic plant called air potato. This attractive vine is taking over many of our natural areas and even our neighborhoods. If we don't start eradicating it, soon it will cover so much acreage that all of the native species that live there won't survive.

According to the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council invasive exotic pest plants are biological pollutants. Menacing exotics may be responsible for destroying more natural habitat each year than is destroyed through land development. Highly invasive exotic species severely disrupt native ecosystems. They may totally displace native species.

Exotics may eliminate or severely alter habitat for wildlife by displacing food plants or altering the structure of the ecosystem. A few problem exotic species are extremely flammable and may pose a danger to humans, as well as wildlife and the native flora, when they burn. Some invasive species can invade and clog waterways. Aggressive species are often ignored until there is a problem of such great magnitude that control becomes difficult, impractical, or extraordinarily expensive.

Exotic plants can and have been introduced accidentally and intentionally, by private enterprises as well as by the government. Accidental imports have arrived as contaminants in bales and cartons of valid agricultural and freight shipments. Some arrived in the ballast water of old sailing ships. Some deliberate imports came in as ornamentals, some for erosion control, and some for the aquarium trade. Others were smuggled in. Many exotics came in before we had import regulations or recognized invasive species as problems.

What can one person do?

- Become informed, and share your knowledge.
- Learn how to tell the invasive exotics from less dangerous species.
- Remove invasive exotics from your own yard or land.
- Don't use nearby natural areas as places to throw yard debris.

- Volunteer to remove exotics from natural areas.
- Support bio-control programs.
- Let your elected representatives know that you support the control of exotic species

Here's your chance to find out more about some of the problem plants and animals in Florida. You will also have a chance to win a beautiful, native plant as a door prize. The plants that will be given away at the workshops and at the exchange day are provided by Lord's Farm Nursery in Lake Placid. By planting native and removing exotics, you will be actively taking part in helping the environment you live in. You can be part of the solution by helping to remove them and also get your friends, neighbors, kids and grandkids involved and start helping native species to survive.

So, come on out to the Bert J. Harris Agriculture Center on September 18th at 1:00 p.m. and get educated and have some fun. Refreshments will be available and the workshop is free. What have you got to lose?