

# SCHEFFLERA ON THE LOOSE IN SOUTH FLORIDA

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As a kid growing up in coastal Palm Beach County, it seemed every yard in my neighborhood had at least three plants in common: A citrus tree, a coconut palm, and a token schefflera – usually in the center of a cheesy landscape cluster, which also included several multi-colored croton cultivars. While on a recent visit to my old neighborhood, I noticed that the citrus trees are huge, some harboring tree forts. The coconut palms are gone, probably victims of lethal yellowing. Not to worry though, they have all been replaced with weeping figs, Norfolk Island pines, or queen palms. I also noticed that the schefflera are **not** gone. In fact, schefflera (*Schefflera actinophylla*) is as popular as ever in South Florida's created and natural landscape.

Schefflera is reported as naturalized and spreading in 28 natural areas in Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and Collier Counties (FLEPPC Data Base, 1995). Invaded habitats include sand pine scrub, tropical hardwood hammock, pine flatwoods, pine rockland, oak hammock, and cypress strand. Schefflera can be found invading and thriving in the extremes of the dry sand dune and the dense shaded canopy of live oak. It also grows as an epiphyte on native live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*), cabbage palms (*Sabal palmetto*), and other trees. As in its native Australia, schefflera produces seeds that are distributed by birds. In Florida, the fruits are consumed by fish crows, mockingbirds, starlings, parrots, and other birds (Austin, 1996).

Schefflera is reported to have escaped and naturalized in several parts of the tropics and subtropics (Frodin, 1975). In Hawaii, schefflera has naturalized in relatively low elevation, mesic, disturbed areas on the islands of Kauai, Oahu, Maui, and Hawaii (Wagner, 1990).

Of all Category I plant species listed by the FLEPPC as invading and disrupting native plant communities in Florida, schefflera is probably the most universally recognized species - not only in Florida, but probably throughout



Schefflera is King of the Urban Jungle.

the world. A recent surf on the Web yielded 795 hits for schefflera. Almost all touted how wonderful schefflera is as an interior foliage plant. They grow without much light, they don't require much water or fertilizer, pruning is unnecessary, and you don't need special potting soil. In fact, you don't need "soil" at all - rocks and things will do just fine. Most nurseries and garden stores carry schefflera. You can order dwarf varieties, variegated, Bonsai and even silk trees, all at *sensible prices*. No doubt, schefflera is ideal for the plant lover with a less-than-green thumb.

My internet search only encountered four references regarding the negative qualities of schefflera. KidSource Online lists *The Most Commonly Ingested Plants* as compiled by the American Association of Poison Control Centers Toxic Exposure Surveillance System. Schefflera is listed as the seventh most ingested plant in the United States. The active toxin is calcium oxalate raphides,

also found in philodendron (the most commonly ingested plant) and many other ariods. Symptoms include a burning sensation in lips, mouth and throat; contact dermatitis; and remote risk of edematous swelling in back of mouth and throat, leading to closure of airways. I found no reference that directly linked schefflera ingestion with mortality. However, a study conducted at North Dakota State University found that rats which ingested a pellet containing 50% Purina Rat Chow and 50% schefflera plant tissue died as a result of gastrointestinal hemorrhaging within four days. Mice that received the same treatment died within seven days (Quam et al, 1985.). A side note: the equally popular weeping fig (*Ficus benjamina*) apparently is safe to eat.

Another "negative" hit was the Council's list of invasive plants and a link to our Web page -which is [WWW.FLEPPC.ORG](http://WWW.FLEPPC.ORG). The third hit was an article written by Dr. Dan Austin in the Summer, 1996 FLEPPC newsletter, entitled: "Notes of Three Rogue Aussies." The fourth hit was a page created by Doug Scofield of Pompano Beach, Florida, "Invasive Plants: Australian Plants in South Florida." Dr.

# POSTCARDS FROM PARADISE: SEPARATED LOVERS AND THE BEACH NAUPAKA

Roger Hammer

Metro-Dade Parks Department

To request a plant identification clarification, write to Roger (attn: "Postcards from Paradise") at the following address:  
22200 SW 137<sup>th</sup> Ave., Goulds, FL 33170.

Austin and Doug Scofield succinctly describe the problem here in South Florida..... "schefflera is on the loose!"

Most frustrating to the land manager is the fact that schefflera is very difficult to kill with herbicides. A cut-stump treatment with 50% GARLON 3A (triclopyr) or 10% GARLON 4 is recommended. If a cut-stump application is not possible, apply a wide band of 10% GARLON 4 to the trunk of smaller individuals and 20% GARLON 4 on larger individuals (Langeland and Stocker, 1997). A re-treatment may be required after one year.

The take home message for the natural resource manager is not good. Schefflera is here to stay. Birds will always be vectors. Introducing biocontrols for such a popular ornamental will never be an option. Herbicides are only partially effective, and like most Australian plants, death by fire is no guarantee. Maybe if we start a rumor that schefflera attracts mosquitoes..... encephalitis-carrying mosquitoes.

## References

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The exotic *Scaevola sericea* has succulent, spoon-shaped, light green leaves. The fruit of this species is white.

Legend has it a beautiful Hawaiian woman's lover gave her a naupaka flower back in the days when it was a full flower. They had a quarrel and she tore the flower in half, telling him not to speak to her again until he found another flower. The gods became upset at her behavior, turned all of the naupaka flowers into half-flowers, and the two lovers remained separated while the man searched in vain for another whole flower. He died broken hearted. The half-flower shape is said to be, in Hawaiian lore, a reminder for lovers to be more tolerant of each other and to cherish their blessings of love.

The genus *Scaevola*, in the Goodeniaceae, or Goodenia Family, is comprised of 130 tropical species, mostly centered in Australia, but with one widespread, pantropical, coastal species, beach naupaka, *Scaevola sericea* (syn. *S. taccada*). Beach naupaka is a native constituent of the islands and coastal areas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including Hawaii. Its seeds are viable for long periods and are capable of drifting in seawater for an extended time, utilizing favorable ocean currents to colonize far away beaches. Studies have shown that the seeds remain viable in seawater, but germinate only in freshwater, such as