

A new kind of invasive pest has slipped into the woods and swamps of South Florida. This pest is well camouflaged. On first encounter, it is welcomed by most land managers. Yet this pest ultimately causes the worst environmental damage I've ever encountered. If not monitored closely, this pest can destroy the very natural resources we all strive to protect. Heed my warnings before it's too late, or you too may see your favorite wildland haunts visited by this destructive nudnik. I regret to report that it's not just a South Florida problem, either. If it is not already, this pest will soon be a national problem. This problem must be corrected without delay, before public confidence in our resource management skills is permanently harmed. What is this awful pest and how did it get here? Believe it or not, we (us; that is, invasive plant managers) introduced it and we are responsible for it – it is us!

We have done a good job of educating the general public and our legislators about the invasive plant problem in this country. We can finally see our efforts paying dividends from the local board rooms to the highest levels in our Federal government. In Florida, the Legislature has appropriated millions in recent years to fund control programs. We have developed solid management programs and set out to destroy these pests with the best of intentions. So what's the problem and where did we go wrong? We have unwittingly created an industry to do battle against these pests where no industry existed previously, and we have done so without establishing the appropriate performance standards for excellence. With governmental acceptance of low bids for contractual labor, and no uniform standards for training and experience, we have put our natural treasures in the hands of untrained laborers. This has not always been the case, but it has been the recent trend. I'll give two examples, both in Palm Beach County.

While these stories are true, the names have been changed to protect the guilty. We'll call the first site Dimpled Chad Park. Dimpled Chad Park was purchased as part of a larger "greenway" project which connects a series of natural areas owned by various local and state agencies. The property



Non-target herbicide damage to native slash pine.

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contains wetlands that are critical to the health of Florida's first Federally designated Wild and Scenic River. Shortly after acquisition, a contractor was hired to control invasive plants on the property. Herbicide applications controlled most of the invasive plants. Unfortunately, control also extended to most of the surrounding native forbs and trees (top photo). Apparently, application approach and herbicide overspray caused the damage.

The second site we'll call Butterfly Ballot Park. Butterfly Ballot Park was purchased as mitigation for a nearby



development. One of the botanical jewels of the property is (or should I say, was) the large number of mature dahoon hollies (*Ilex cassine*). The devel-



photo: www.newleafgraphics.com

Native dahoon holly (*Ilex cassine*) with mature red fruits.

oper was required to treat the invasive pest-plants (mostly Brazilian pepper) on this property as a condition of their permit. To save money, day-laborers were hired and instructed to "kill anything with red berries." Oops! At last count, 5,155 native trees were chopped down and herbicided (see photo). The company is facing a fine of up to \$2.6 million for their mistake. Lack of supervision and qualified help the culprit.

These are only two recent examples from a long list of growing problems. We can fix these problems, but we must do it collectively. We must insist that only qualified companies get this work. We must develop educational resources so more companies can



Non-native Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*) with mature red fruit.

advance cadres of qualified staff. For instance, Florida is in the final phase of developing a certification program for invasive plant control in natural areas. Once established, we should all insist that only applicators certified for this

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new category be allowed to bid and implement this work for us. We may have to pay more in the short term, but the returns are invaluable. As environmentalist Richard Moyroud said after surveying the damage at Butterfly Ballot Park, "It's like someone going into a museum and slashing up the paintings ..... can you replace that?"



The stump of a large dahoon holly, *left*- it was mistakenly cut and treated with a herbicide. Mix of native dahoon holly, wax myrtle, myrsine and red bay, *above* - all dead or dying from a herbicide application intended for exotic Brazilian pepper.

We all know that you can't. Only we can bring a halt to such failures. As leaders in this field, we must insist that this growing industry meet the highest standards. These standards will, of necessity, raise the bar to another level. Getting there will be no small feat. I think we have no choice.

- Dan Thayer, [dthayer@sfwmd.gov](mailto:dthayer@sfwmd.gov)

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