

Are We Doomed to InFERNaL Damnation?

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What's green and crawls all over? Well, besides my Aunt Sophie on a rough ocean passage, Old World climbing fern (*Lygodium microphyllum*) comes to mind. This vining fern has real attitude, covering up more and more of south-central Florida with each passing day. It was apparently introduced in the 1960s as an ornamental by nurseries near Jupiter along the Palm Beach, Martin County line. Old World climbing fern's Florida range now extends from Collier County's Fakahatchee Strand to the southwest, Broward County to the southeast, and Highlands and Hardee counties to the north. And no one knows where it's gonna stop!

Old World climbing fern is reported as native to three continents: Africa, southern Asia and Australia. Wow! Is this a tolerant plant! Its spread over such a broad territory and wide variety of locales is extraordinary. Since this plant is a true fern, it can spread as far as the winds can blow its minute spores from their carriers, termed "sori-s," on the undersides of the fronds.

In Florida, this fern overtakes trees, structures, and slow-moving children. Its oldest Florida colonies, roughly 30 years old, have developed ferny carpets several feet thick that shroud cypress heads and pine flatwoods, and spread into freshwater wetlands and mangrove borders. The yard-thick beds of fern roots, stems, and fronds cover forest floors in impenetrable mats that stop all other plants cold.

Egad! It's a Towering InFERNo!

Besides overwhelming other plants, this green monster really roars when fire comes on the scene. Prescribed fires are set to maintain healthy Florida habitats, especially pine flatwoods. Yet, fires in Old World climbing fern-infested woods can lead to disaster. Its accumulated growth, while thick, is relatively lightweight. Burning clumps of the fern float away from prescribed burns and wildfires on heat plumes. These burning kites can spread fire far and wide.

Before the kites of fire are launched, a lot more damage may be done. Old World climbing fern growth on trees fuels fire upward into the sensitive crowns of pines and cypress. Fires that would normally burn placidly across the forest floor rage lethally upward. Entire forests may succumb to one intense fire.

Well, Isn't That A Sight for "Sore-Eyes?"

Well, who's that hopping down the trail? It's researchers to the rescue! Biologists plagued with Old World climbing fern problems are forging into the fray to find ways to fight off the ferny advances.

At Jonathon Dickinson State Park and GFC's Corbett Wildlife Management Area herbicide applications and manual removal methods have been demonstrated. Cooperative trials are underway to compare flooding, burning, and differing herbicide effects. Cooperators include staffers from Palm Beach County, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, South Florida Water Management District, Florida Power and Light, and the University of Florida Center for Aquatic Plants.

Biological control may be the most effective way to contain this spore-spreading marauder. Evaluation of insects that may feed solely on Old World climbing fern is underway - USDA entomologist Robert Pemberton spent the Fall of 1997 in southeast Asia, his bug net in hand.

Here's to their success! May they stop Old World climbing fern's spread across, over, and through Florida, before Old World climbing fern stops them.