

The Great Air Potato

RoundUp



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By Steven Vann

The Great Air Potato RoundUp was an invasive nonnative plant awareness festival held by the City of Gainesville, Florida's Nature Operations Division on February 5th, 2000. The focus of the event was to help the public recognize that they play an integral role in the management of their local nature parks. An educated public is one of the most effective and powerful tools for a land manager. Most of our parks have residential borders and are connected to other neighborhoods by the many creeks that flow through Gainesville. For the last eighteen months, the City has been developing a public education campaign to help people understand how landscaping decisions they make at home can affect the natural communities in their parks.

The initial campaign consisted of nativescape workshops, a corresponding brochure, and guided nature walks. The program enjoyed limited success. Our message was getting through, but we often had low attendance, and many of the participants were already aware of the problems of non-native invasive plants. We were failing to attract a large portion of our target audience - the public who had little or no knowledge of the issue. Then one afternoon, while brainstorming in the office, it came to us. We needed to have one large, full-scale education event, disguised as a volunteer exotic plant removal day and celebration. To make the event fun for everyone, we decided to have prizes, competitions, and of course, a free Tshirt for participants, the "lure." Once we came up with a catchy name, The Great Air Potato RoundUp was on its way.

Why Air Potato?

We chose air potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*) for three reasons. First, air potato's prevalence in Gainesville helped volunteers recognize the plant during and after the event. The plant has large populations established along most of Gainesville's creeks; it is a menace to both public nature parks and private landowners. Second, picking up tubers that resemble baking potatoes involved little training for volunteers. Having a one day event did not allow time to train volunteers in plant identification, mechanical removal, and herbicide application.

Lastly, air potato tuber removal allowed us better scheduling opportunities. The spring and fall in Gainesville are booked with festivals, plant sales, and football games and the summer is just too hot to attract many people outside. That left winter, when the plant is dormant and most of the tubers have descended, blanketing the ground...perfect.

Organization

The Great Air Potato RoundUp was modeled after popular litter cleanups, with participants collecting tubers instead of trash. We targeted areas in nature parks or properties that have direct creek connections to nature parks. Prospective volunteers were asked to call prior to the event to pre-register. The volunteers were assigned sites and asked to meet their site leader at the site on the morning of the event. The site leaders were key. In addition to orientating and supervising volunteers, they had the most important task of the day, education. We asked persons who were knowledgeable in ecology, Florida's Natural Communities, and invasive nonnative plant ecology to volunteer as site leaders. Armed with pressed plant samples, line drawings, photos, maps, and fact sheets, our site leaders gave short presentations prior to letting the volunteers loose to collect tubers. To encourage participation and increase motivation, recognition was given to the individual and group with most tubers collected, the largest tuber collected, and the most unusual tuber collected. These awards were presented at the celebration following the event. The celebration also offered educational displays, food, and live music from the local acoustic duo Trail Ridge, who performed their new tune, *Air Potatoville*. The event culminated with a prize drawing for several great prizes, including a new mountain bike (another great lure).

Sponsorship

Prior to the event, one of our goals was to obtain sponsors. The more money we had, the more we could do. We sent out several letters to businesses and organizations, and followed up with phone calls. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, we took our show on the road, and gave several presenta-

tions about the event. The old saying, "persistence does pay off," is true. The donations came pouring in. The Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council (EPPC) and the Payne's Prairie Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) enthusiastically supported us. They were followed by donations from Dow Agrosiences, Brewer International, Monsanto, and Water and Air Research. In addition to monetary sponsorships, several sponsors donated services or products. Full Circle Solutions helped us with the logistics of disposing of the tubers once collected, and a local bicycle shop, Spin Cycle, donated a mountain bike for the raffle. In addition, many local businesses donated several prizes that included movie and restaurant gift certificates, birdhouses, native plants, gym memberships, and much more.

The Power of Advertising

Now we had to get volunteers. Instead of depending on a single advertising method, we developed a multi-media approach. A radio ad ran twenty times in the week prior to the event, posters were put up in business windows around town, small signs were placed at strategic intersections, and we bought ad space on the side of two buses from the local public transit. We also took advantage of several free advertising sources. The local public radio station played public service announcements daily about the event, and local newspapers ran articles before and after. We put listings in local volunteer announcements, and wrote articles for several local newsletters. We then began targeting groups such as local clubs and organizations, Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops, neighborhood associations, and two great volunteer resources in Gainesville, The University of Florida and

Santa Fe Community College. We used the same persistent approach as obtaining sponsors; starting with letters, followed by phone calls, more phone calls, and then a traveling slide show to meetings.

Success!

Thanks to a creative idea, aggressive advertising, and generous sponsors the event was a success. When first discussing the idea, we imagined getting 150 volunteers and decided to shoot for 300. Then the phone began to ring non-stop, and two weeks prior to the event we topped the 300 person goal. We added new sites daily to handle the increasing number of people. The final tally on the day after the event was staggering. 675 volunteers participated at 21 sites around Gainesville, collecting a total of 11,748 pounds of tubers, almost 6 tons! The success went well beyond the numbers. The event included knowledgeable volunteers, (the choir) and the general public. This mix had volunteers learning from other volunteers. An article in the local student newspaper, *The Alligator*, captured the real success of the event. The article quoted a mother explaining how she and her children were headed home to remove air potato in their yard, and a teacher who was saving some tubers to show to her class on Monday morning. We are still receiving calls from people who are removing air potato from their yards, and from others that are organizing small roundups with their neighborhood associations. These types of results are too valuable to measure.

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