

Palm Beach County Ordinance Helps Residents Fight Invasive Plants

by Matthew King

A 1999 survey of South Florida revealed that over 2 million acres of land were covered by just four of the worst invasive exotic pest plants: Brazilian pepper, Australian pine, melaleuca & Old World climbing fern. Since 1990, Palm Beach County has purchased over 28,000 acres of natural areas, and the removal of invasive vegetation from them is the top management priority and the largest expense. Over \$80 million per year is spent in the state of Florida managing invasive plants on state-owned lands. Palm Beach County spends between \$2-3 million. It is for these reasons that Palm Beach County is taking an aggressive approach to combating the destructive plants.

In April 1986, Palm Beach County passed a law which required the removal of several species of invasive non-native plants whenever a piece of property was being developed, whether for a single-family residence, a church, or a commercial development. The ordinance also required that the properties remain free and clear of these invasive plants. In 1992, a second law was passed that required properties built before 1986 to remove the same invasive plants by the year 2006. Both of these laws only applied to developed property in the unincorporated areas of the County.

In 2000, the Palm Beach County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) started receiving numerous complaints concerning the 2006 deadline. Most of the complaints focused on the costs associated with the removal of the prohibited plant species, especially for Australian pine and Melaleuca trees. Because of these public concerns, the BCC directed the County's Department of Environmental Resources Management (ERM) to develop a new ordinance that would incorporate an incentive program to assist property owners with the removal of the invasive plants.

In 2001, ERM conducted several public workshops throughout the County seeking additional comments and suggestions concerning the proposed ordinance. The main concerns expressed at these workshops echoed those heard by the BCC: costs.

As a result of these workshops, ERM presented an innovative invasive non-native plant ordinance that established several incentive and financial assistance programs to help property owners with the removal of the invasive plants. The BCC passed the ordinance in February 2003.



Old World climbing fern climbing pine trees in the North Jupiter Flatwoods Natural Area.



Aerial view of Royal Palm Beach Pines Natural Area showing boundary and buffer area (red line).

The main focus of the Prohibited Invasive Non-native Vegetation Removal Ordinance is removal of the County's nine prohibited plant species on those properties within 500 feet (the buffer area) of 52 publicly owned natural areas. Owners of these properties would be required to remove all nine invasive species based upon a phased-in removal schedule, but they would have the assistance of several incentive programs (see page 21). Those property owners that choose not to participate in the program will have to remove the prohibited plant species at their own expense by the removal schedule dates. Properties that are not within a buffer area would only need removal of Air-potato and Old World climbing fern vines.

The County Commission created five incentive programs to assist property owners and public agencies with fighting invasive vegetation:

Australian Pine/Melaleuca Removal Program & Cost Share Program:

These two programs are for properties within 500 feet of a natural area. For the Australian Pine/Melaleuca Removal Program, the County will remove or eradicate the two tree species on parcels in the buffer areas at no cost to the property owner. For the Cost Share Program, parcel owners in the buffer areas can have County vendors remove the remaining seven of the nine prohibited invasive non-native plant species with a very minimal cost share (maximum \$500) provided by the parcel owners. To date, over 8,000 prohibited plants have been removed from approximately 150 properties located within the buffer zone of 11 natural areas.

Invasive Vine Strike Force:

The Invasive Vine Strike Force program is a quick response strike force that treats and kills lygodium and Air-potato vines on public and private properties. To date, the County has treated over 20 acres of lygodium or Air-potato vines on approximately 110 properties.

Public Lands Grant Program:

This incentive program includes matching grant funds available to public entities in Palm Beach County for the removal of non-native invasive vegetation on publicly owned lands. Palm Beach County budgets \$400,000/fiscal year for the matching grant program, with a \$50,000 maximum for each individual project. Over the past two years, over \$730,000 has been awarded to various public agencies in Palm Beach County, resulting in invasive plant removal projects totaling over \$1,600,000.

Canopy Replacement Program:

The Canopy Replacement Program is an incentive for parcel owners outside the 500-foot buffer zone to remove the County's prohibited plant species on their own, although they are not required to do so by County Ordinance, prior to regulatory deadlines. Property owners will receive replacement trees for their participation to help minimize the loss of canopy associated with the removal of prohibited vegetation. The program is currently under development.

Prohibited Plants & Removal Schedule

Common Name	Scientific Name
2004	
Old World climbing fern	<i>Lygodium microphyllum</i>
Air-potato vine	<i>Dioscorea bulbifera</i>
2006	
Melaleuca, Punk Tree	<i>Melaleuca quinquenervia</i>
2008	
Brazilian pepper	<i>Schinus terebinthifolius</i>
Carrotwood	<i>Cupaniopsis anacardioides</i>
2010	
Earleaf acacia	<i>Acacia auriculiformis</i>
Schefflera	<i>Schefflera actinophylla</i>
2012	
Australian pine	<i>Casuarina</i> spp.
Kudzu	<i>Pueraria montana</i> var. <i>lobata</i>

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