



Battle in Bartram's Hammock

by Matthew Saunders, Paynes Prairie AmeriCorps

Many people enjoy visiting the north end of Payne's Prairie Preserve State Park in north-central Florida to walk the La Chua Trail and see the Alachua Sink and all the natural beauty that the prairie has to offer. But behind this beauty, there is a monster lurking. It isn't a rabid coyote or a mutant feral hog – the monster is the invasive exotic plant, coral ardisia.

Coral ardisia (*Ardisia crenata*) is an invasive exotic plant that is native to Japan and northern India. It was initially introduced in Florida as an ornamental shrub in the early 20th century. This plant is considered a monster (despite being so beautiful) because the competition it evolved with in its native range isn't found here in Florida and so it grows unchecked. Coral ardisia is an evergreen shrub with dark green, waxy, alternate leaves and bright red berries. The berries have an 80% germination rate and can reach a ground density of greater than 100 plants per square meter. I've seen some ardisia plants over six feet tall with hundreds of berries on them. This massive ardisia growth drowns out 70% of the natural light available to native seedlings and displaces the native ground cover. You can see how this creates a major problem for fauna dependant on native plants.

For the past three months I've been fighting this monster in Bartram's Hammock, a diverse hardwood hammock on the north end of the prairie. If you've been on the Gainesville-Hawthorne Trail and noticed people trampling through the woods with shovels and "body-bags," don't worry

– we’re the good guys. After a three month fight, I can say with certainty that we’ve bagged about 80% of the coral ardisia...well, maybe 75%. If it wasn’t for the help of Paynes Prairie volunteers and park biologist Jim Weimer, I would literally spend my whole year of AmeriCorps pulling coral ardisia in the same 100 acres of hammock. Together I would estimate that we’ve pulled thousands of plants and millions of berries. To better understand how much is out there, in a half day of work, we filled a five foot “body-bag” with so many berries (each berry probably weighs a gram) that it took two people to lift it into the dumpster.

The first time Jim Weimer took me out to remove coral ardisia, he had to point out the plant and its characteristic berries several times. Now, after three months and countless hours ripping it from the earth, not only can I see a newly spawned ardisia plant from miles across the hammock, I now see ardisia in my dreams, and can sense an ardisia taproot working its way into the ground.

So, the next time you see the red and green coral ardisia – a plant that reminds me of Christmas – please destroy it. The best way to do this is to pull off all the seeds and place them in a trash bag. Leave the seeds out in the sun for 2-3 days and then throw them away. When you pull the plant, get as many of the roots as you can, as you’ll notice that about half of the plant is actually underground. Finally, hang the plant so the roots are completely off the ground. Then you can feel good knowing you are doing your part to help protect Florida’s natural ecosystems.

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