

GREEN GONE BAD

Featured Ornamental Plant: *Ficaria verna*

Some exotic ornamental plants behave badly when they escape from the place they are planted. Infestations of these plants have negative impacts on natural environments. A new ornamental has emerged as a threat: *Ficaria verna*; common name: Fig Buttercup



Figure 1. Dense mat of fig buttercup in April

This small plant with glossy green leaves and pretty yellow flowers was discovered in a park located in Greenville's Reedy River floodplain in winter of 2013. It was spotted in mid-winter, and seemed to be forming dense mats of vegetation, scattered throughout Lake Conestee Nature Park. It was found in moist soil and open to shady exposures, even under a dense canopy of Chinese privet.



Figure 2. Close-up of flowers and glossy leaves.

After consulting with botanists, it was determined to be *Ficaria verna*, or fig buttercup. A review of invasive plant literature revealed that it has been a real weed problem in other states in the Northeast. It has been sold as a garden plant, and is commonly mistaken for marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*). Well-established populations have been found in at least three sites in Greenville and Rock Hill, each in a riparian area downstream from residential areas. Two of these sites were not far from presumed introduction location (garden setting) in a residential area upstream.

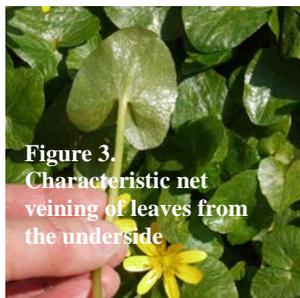


Figure 3. Characteristic net veining of leaves from the underside

Ficaria verna emerges in winter (ahead of most natives), flowers in March-April, then quickly begins to die back. Above-ground portions are mostly gone by June. The tubers survive underground to establish a dense cover again next year. Recent reports of fig buttercup have come from NC, GA and TN. In light of long-term experience in the Northeast, the observations in the Greenville area may indicate that fig buttercup is in the process of becoming seriously invasive in SC and the Southeast. Some characteristics that may contribute to rapid, wide-spread invasion by fig buttercup include:

- * *Ficaria verna* occurs as five very similar sub-species.
- * Multiple reproductive strategies: 4 of the 5 sub-species produce viable seed; 2 can reproduce numerous axillary bulbils; all have sturdy underground tubers that can make new plants if separated from the parent (see Figs 4 and 5). Bulbils and tubers are easily spread by water events (and well-meaning weed-pullers).
- * It is a perennial which emerges early before most natives and dies back to the ground by June. Its short growth cycle provides only a limited treatment window.
- * Once established, it creates extensive, continuous, dense vegetative mats too thick for natives to establish or persist in.
- * It thrives in riparian environments on the banks of rivers, streams, lakes and ponds, and it is most commonly found adjacent to water bodies. Water-borne dispersal of bulbils and seeds is potentially a very effective mechanism of invasive spread.



Figure 4. Characteristic tubers that give it over-wintering capability.



Figure 5. Small tan axillary bulbils. The plant senesces in June, leaving bulbils lying on the soil surface.



*Deemed by some to be a desirable landscape plant (often confused with marsh marigold, *Caltha palustris*) and it is still available commercially.

*These findings indicate the potential that populations may occur along watercourses throughout the state. If this is the case, SC may be on the cusp of a very serious invasive weed problem within flood-plain natural areas. Wide-spread scouting of floodplain areas are recommended so that control measures can be initiated.

Please consider removing this species from nursery inventories. Native alternatives include marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*) wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*), bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), twinleaf (*Jeffersonia diphylla*), and various species of *Trillium* depending on the conditions of the planting site.

Visit <http://www.invasive.org/browse/subinfo.cfm?sub=3069> for more information about Fig Buttercup

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See also: <http://www.se-eppc.org/southcarolina/> and <http://www.se-eppc.org/>

