Air Potatoes Run Rampant

by Karen Brown

What started as a fun way to gain the attention of festival-goers at a spring garden event turned into an experiment to see just how far these amazing air potatoes would grow without soil, water, or direct sunlight. 236 air potato bulbils (Dioscorea bulbifera) were counted into a glass vase as a contest to see who could guess the correct number. It was a popular contest with 83 people participating and a grand prize of a Florida native tree. The event took place on the first day of spring, March 20th, in Gainesville, Florida. Since the vase full of potatoes generated a lot of lively discussion, the contest was repeated at the SE-EPPC/FLEPPC Symposium in late April, using the same batch of bulbils that had been left in the same vase. Following that event, they were left on a filing cabinet under fluorescent office lights until August 2nd, still with no water or soil added. By the end of the experiment, vines were growing into notebooks on a ceiling-level bookshelf and tiny bulbils were forming along the vines. Below are photographs arranged in a time sequence to show the prolific growth of this exotic pest plant. Photos by Michael Meisenburg.

Tracking the growth of Dioscorea bulbifera