

Gainesville's Great Air Potato Round Up

by Gary Paul, Nature Operations Division, City of Gainesville, Florida

Gainesville's Annual Great Air Potato Round Up was a spectacular success for the seventh year this past January with almost 1,000 participants removing nearly 16,000 pounds of air potato tubers from local natural areas. This brings the event's seven-year total to more than 111 tons of tubers.

The Round Up has become a popular and effective educational tool to focus the public's attention on invasive exotic plants and their management. A goal of the campaign is to help people understand how home landscaping decisions can affect the plant communities in our natural areas. Nearly all of Gainesville's 21 nature parks border residential areas and connect to other neighborhoods by the many creeks that flow through the city. These adjoining properties and creeks can serve as dispersal corridors for the highly invasive air potato plants and their tubers.

The City of Gainesville's initial public education campaign on invasive plants in natural areas consisted of "nativescape" workshops, a corresponding brochure, and guided nature walks. However, the program had only limited success. Our message was getting through, but we often had low attendance, and many of the participants already were aware of the problems created by non-native invasive plants. We were failing to attract a large portion of our target audience – residents with little or no knowledge of the issue.

We decided to try a large, full-scale education event – a volunteer exotic plant removal day and celebration, to attract this target audience. The event was modeled after popular litter cleanups, with participants collecting tubers instead of trash. To make it fun for everyone, we planned to have prizes, competitions and, of course, free T-shirts for participants. We sought sponsors to donate cash, goods and services, sending out letters to businesses and organizations, and following up with phone calls. We used a multi-media approach to attract volunteers, including radio public service announcements, posters in business windows, the govern-



ment access television channel, our non-profit support group's newsletter, our website and the newsletters of other environmental organizations who support the event. Local scouting groups, the University of Florida and Santa Fe Community College also were heavily recruited for volunteers. The Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council (FLEPPC) and the Payne's Prairie Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) enthusiastically supported us, as do more than a score of other national and local entities. Once we came up with a catchy name, "The Great Air Potato Round Up" was born in 2000.

Air potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*) was chosen as the focus species for three reasons: First, the distinctive appearance and prevalence of air potato in Gainesville makes this an easy-to-recognize plant to target. Large populations are established along most of Gainesville's creeks, and it is a menace to both publicly held natural areas and private landowners. We target areas in nature parks or properties with direct creek connections to nature parks. Second, picking up tubers that resemble baking potatoes involves little training for

volunteers; a one-day event precludes time to train volunteers in plant identification and removal. Lastly, air potato tuber removal allows for better scheduling opportunities. Spring and autumn in Gainesville are booked with festivals, plant sales, and football games and summer is just too hot to attract many people outdoors. That leaves winter, when the plant goes dormant and collapsing vines deposit tubers on the ground – perfect for easy harvest and disposal!

Volunteers preregister and are assigned to sites. They meet their leader at the site on the morning of the event. Site leaders are a key to the campaign's success. In addition to volunteer supervision, the education they provide is the most critical task of all. We recruit site leaders from people knowledgeable in ecology, Florida's natural communities, and/or invasive non-native plant ecology. Using pressed plant samples, line drawings, photos, maps, and fact sheets, site leaders give short presentations prior to tuber collection by the volunteers. To encourage participation and increase motivation, recognition is given to the individual and to the group with the

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What are some of the current invasive plants being controlled by IPC, Inc. and the PPC?

Invasive Plant Control, Inc. and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy are currently working on an 80 acre restoration of the historic landscape and natural areas in the Panther Hollow Watershed in Schenley Park. Invasive plant challenges include garlic mustard threatening old stands of trillium, May apple and Solomon’s seal; Norway maple which has rapidly eliminated many species found in the original sugar maple-basswood community and Japanese knotweed which has spread along all the stream banks and wetland areas, choking out moist meadow species such as Joe-pye, ironweed, Syllphium cup-plant and seed-box.

What are some invasive plant management projects on the horizon?

Invasive Plant Control, Inc. and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy are currently working with city, county, state and federal partners through the newly formed CWMA, Three Rivers Invasive Species Coalition (TRISC). One of the driving forces behind this coalition is to respond early to eliminate mile-a-minute vine in the western half of the state where it has only recently established a foothold.

For additional information about the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy visit their website at www.pittsburghparks.org.

You can also find this interview online at www.invasiveplantcontrol.com

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most, the largest, and the most unusual tubers collected. Awards are presented at a central celebration following the event, which also offers educational displays, free food, and live music, and culminates with drawings for many great prizes donated by local and national businesses. Past prizes have included valuable items such as a new mountain bike and a kayak!

Public response to The Great Air Potato Round Up has been phenomenal, exceeding all expectations. After seven years, the event is well known in Gainesville and anticipated by residents. Very little recruiting is necessary as people now contact us to ask if they can participate. Still, we speak about the Round Up to civic groups whenever the opportunity presents itself. Our challenge now is to think of ways to expand the educational message to encompass additional problem plants. A preliminary idea is to collaborate with our local chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society to educate nursery owners about the hazards of offering exotic pest plants for sale to the public and alternatives to these plants. Our hope is to someday rid our city’s natural areas of all invasive plant infestations with the help and cooperation of informed citizens.

For more information, contact the author at: paulga@ci.gainesville.fl.us

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