

# Early Records and Recollections of the Florida EPPC Plant List Committee

By Daniel B. Ward

**T**his is a report, from one of its surviving early members, of the records and recollections accompanying the formation of the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council's committee to determine which of Florida's many non-native plant species was of greatest concern as a threat to Florida's lands and vegetation.

In *Wildland Weeds* (10(2):18-22. 2007), Robert F. Doren has given a much-needed (if unorthodox) historical documentation of what became the first effective non-governmental organization to limit the spread of harmful exotic plants. The Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council has grown to have great and benign influence on both the attitudes and practices of regulatory agencies and the general public. Moreover, not only its name but its programs and definitions have been adopted by other states, as an informed citizenry realizes its biological inheritance is being degraded and destroyed by the thoughtless introduction and spread of harmful plants.

One of the most critical functions of the Council was the creation and support of a mechanism for screening the numerous introduced plant species, to determine which were of concern and which innocuous from the standpoint of impact on the environment. This mechanism was the establishment of a committee, now carrying the bland title of "Plant List Committee" to gather information and make these determinations. The way this committee functions, and the missteps and digressions it has suffered along the way to its present influential status, also deserves documentation.

Bob Doren spoke of the formation of the Plant List Committee, but he gave false credit to me by stating "Lou [Whiteaker] sent a letter from EPPC to Dan Ward asking him to head up our committee to further develop the 'List of Most Invasive Species.'" Since I was a member of that committee from its founding days – and since no other

early member seems inclined to undertake the task – it is incumbent upon me that I take the opportunity Bob has opened, to record the first days of the Plant List Committee as best my memories and dusty documents permit.

It was not Lou Whiteaker who contacted Dan Ward; it was Don C. Schmitz who contacted Daniel F. Austin. Don was then an aquatic biologist of the Florida Department of Natural Resources. Dan was then Professor of Botany, Florida Atlantic University. [Pay attention from here on – too many Dons and Dans. The devil is in the details (or in the vowels.)] My memory – burnished somewhat by Dan's also rapidly-fading recollections – was that in early April 1991, Don and Dan ran into one another at a meeting, and Dan took the opportunity to make some strong-worded suggestions for changes in a brief list Don had inserted into the first EPPC newsletter. Don, then an EPPC bigwig (chairman, I believe), responded with the request that Dan try his own hand at making up a better list. Dan asked if he could do this by forming a committee, with members of experience outside the southern peninsula. Don, of course, agreed. Dan then called me, and we cobbled together a list of a dozen persons from throughout the state that we believed would have useful information. Soon after, Don phoned to invite me to be a member of the committee, and on 24 April 1991, Dan sent all prospective members a formal invitation to take part. That date, then, can be recorded as the founding moment of the Plant List Committee.

Dan and I began an intense back-and-forth discussion of what species we should list, what we should call them ("invasive" wasn't yet in our vocabulary), what properties of "weediness" they should have to be listed, and how we should rank them. I, as a pedantic nomenclaturalist, was especially determined that the scientific names were

proper. Dan was also talking with other committee members, from which he received both useful and distracting ideas.

By May 1991, Dan and I were considering publication outlets. Because of my background, I naturally thought of the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), and I went so far as to drag my chairman, David Jones, to a meeting with the IFAS Dean for Research, Jim Davidson. I talked up the value to agriculture (and IFAS) to have the assistance of our array of experts in the growing field of exotic plant control. Jim was quite receptive, at least initially. But David upset the boat by complaining that one long paper proposed by a Botany member would have taken ten percent of the entire Botany budget. Jim then realized we were looking for a publication subsidy, not a way to glorify IFAS. We parted, with his advice that IFAS would welcome the publication – if subsidized by the Council. That was that.

Dan and I probably spent more phone hours talking about rankings than about the individual species to be ranked. At some early point, we tried working with five rankings – we had begun to call them categories – which I have often described as "extremely bad," "very bad," "really bad," "sorta bad," and "kinda bad." Dan defined these in a committee report dated 21 September 1991. Though our definitions, when read separately, seemed to make sense, no two of our members could agree (even when there was no dispute as to the facts) which category to put a given plant into. (I decline to quote these definitions, since they were bad ideas, best left buried.) Our category V briefly appeared in the tentative listing of November 1991. In our published version (our first listing) its six species were quietly forgotten. (That was politically astute of us; one was *Citrus sinensis*.) By our second published listing, we had folded Category IV into other categories. And even three

categories were too many; soon even Category III was abandoned. (The Committee still uses a “category III” as the holding file for proposed species that the Committee isn’t ready to accept.) But the idea of two categories has come to be seen as just right. Everybody seems to understand that there are degrees of badness, and two categories permits the real villains to be emphasized, without dilution by a host of troublesome delinquents. Not only in Florida, but in the expanding EPPC programs in other states, “Category I” and “Category II” have become familiar terms.

A list of harmful “exotic” species had been compiled by Don, published as “The Invasion of Exotic Aquatic and Wetland Plants in Florida” (*Aquatics* 12(2):6-13, 24. 1990). All but a few were aquatics. Their importance differed dramatically, with *Hydrilla verticillata* covering an estimated 22,635 hectares and several species present on less than one hectare. We realized that our EPPC species ranking should reflect not just the acreage they covered, but their propensity to spread and damage the environment. And the definitions that we developed emphasized this property.

This concept, that the exotic plant damages the environment, just grew on us. Long ago, I had taken a course in “Weeds” (taught by Walter Muenscher, author of the once-authoritative how-to-identify-it book by that title) and was preconditioned to think of agricultural weeds as simply “plants out of place.” Slowly, “invasive” crept into our vocabulary and our rankings. Don’s early (1990) paper used the verb “invasion” but never the adjective “invasive.” The first I recall of “invasive” was Dan’s 13 August 1991 report to the Committee. Is it possible than Dan Austin – and our committee – was the originator of this term as now understood? [Not quite! I now find “invasive” quietly used in the very first EPPC newsletter, written and edited by Don Schmitz and dated January 1991. So is it to Don Schmitz that should go the glory of having initiated this invaluable term?]

By August 1991, the Plant List Committee’s original listing had been revised to 27 tentative “wetland and upland forest” plants and 3 “aquatic” plants. By September 1991, the tentative list had burgeoned to 85. When we published our “final” list in

December 1991, it numbered 116, though only 37 of them were in our newly-invented Categories I and II.

Our second edition, published in May 1993, consisted of 33 Category I plants, 64 Category II plants, and 29 Category III plants. At the urging of Don, we added several of the aquatic species he had identified in 1990 but we had omitted in our first listing. Our third listing, May 1995, grew to 65 Category I, 54 Category II, and 35 Category III plants. With

time, the rate of change has slowed; our 2005 invasive list, with most of the relatively harmless species of Category III now omitted, is only slightly increased, to 67 Category I and 66 Category II plants.

We agreed that our list must be based on actual, recorded observations, verified by specimens deposited in one of the state’s herbaria. But Dan was deluged with apocryphal reports from persons he wanted to trust. I was always on his case, saying I hadn’t seen it, so it surely wasn’t so. (I became the bad guy, trying to keep “first records” from being immediately listed as “invasive” before we learned anything about them.) Dan, to the end of his tenure as chairman, was never able to hold our folks to our intended standard of listing nothing that wasn’t documented. Nor have succeeding chairs always been able to hold our well-meaning but over-busy members to this standard.

The Committee, from its first moments, was chaired by Dan Austin. He periodically (every two years, more or less) called its members to meet in his office and lab on the Florida Atlantic University campus, Boca Raton. Between meetings, he held things together as the informational center for questions regarding problem plants and for proposals for additional listings. In January 2001, as he was packing in anticipation of retirement to Arizona, he turned his files and chair duties over to Kathy Craddock

Burks of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Kathy shifted our meeting site to the Disney Preserve, Kissimmee, and rigorously maintained a biennial meeting schedule. Following Kathy’s untimely death in June 2006, the



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chairmanship responsibility was taken up by Keith A. Bradley of The Institute for Regional Conservation.

The Committee has adhered to the practice established in early years of publishing a new “official” listing on a two-year schedule. Almost invariably, changes in the previous listing are the result of the collective wisdom of the Committee members, expressed at its biennial meeting. Only on exceptional occasions, when the potential harm of a species is newly recognized and there is urgency that it be brought to public attention (as with *Scleria lacustris*), are decisions made without full membership participation.

Strength of the Committee is entirely dependent upon the quality of its membership. Membership of the Committee has been held at twelve. Following the practice begun by Dan, the chair has made final decisions as to who should be asked to serve, though with advice from the members and outside parties. Participation has been quite uneven, with some members attending every meeting, others only taking part by email and phone. Tenure has tended to be lengthy; (like the Mafia) it is easy to become a member, near impossible to depart. The slow rate of membership turnover provides desirable stability to the listings and rankings.

To give credit to the members and the work they have done over the years – and

to assure these good people their records will not be lost in time – their names and dates of service are given below.

- Daniel F. Austin, 1991 – 2001
- Keith A. Bradley, 2001 – present
- Ann Buckley, 1991 – 1994
- Kathy C. Burks, 1998 – 2006
- Nancy C. Coile, 1997 – 2007
- James G. Duquesnel, 1994 – 2005
- Janice Duquesnel, 2005 - present
- Edward Freeman, 2001 – 2005
- David W. Hall, 1991 – present
- Roger L. Hammer, 2001 – present
- Theodore O. Hendrickson, 1991 – 1999
- Ronald Hofstetter, 1991 – 1999
- Colette C. Jacono, 2006 – present
- Suzanne Koptur, 1991 – 1999
- Kenneth A. Langeland, 2001 – present
- Chris Lockhart, 1999 – present
- Joe Maguire, 1991 – 1999
- Mark McMahon, 1991 – 1999
- Gil Nelson, 2005 – present
- Robert W. Pemberton, 1994 – present
- George Puig, 1991 – 1994
- Don C. Schmitz, 1991 – 1994
- Robert W. Simons, 2006 – present
- Sandra Vardaman, 1994 – 2005
- Daniel B. Ward, 1991 – present
- Richard P. Wunderlin, 1991 – present

The marvel of the Exotic Pest Plant Council – and especially its Plant List Committee – is that a modest number of moderately informed but highly motivated folks, wholly without legal enforcement powers, can devise a mechanism that is so effective in reducing the use and spread of those plant species known to harm our environment. The publicity that follows our condemning a plant as “invasive” makes it near-impossible for nurseries to stock the species without receiving scathing denunciation from their customers. Landscapers and developers shudder at the thought they may be accused of harboring such an accursed species. And the general public is made more aware that they should use good environmental judgment in the selection of plants with which they beautify their homes. I am honored to have had the opportunity to be a part of this good cause.

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Daniel B. Ward, Professor Emeritus, Department of Botany, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida 32611. 352/372-8711.

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See you in '08!

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