

The Calusa Lakes Community Brazilian Pepper Busting Initiative

by Annemarie Post, Extension Agent, Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Program, University of Florida/IFAS Sarasota County Extension



While exploring the wetland preserve areas and studying plot maps of the Calusa Lakes Homeowners Association in Nokomis, FL in 2002, community residents Julie Whitney and Peter Price found that about sixteen acres were infested, mainly with Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*). Smaller pockets of punk trees (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*) and air potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*) also were present. They took the initiative to start restoring these areas by removing invasive exotic plants and replanting appropriate native vegetation. To help them manage this daunting task, they engaged a group of volunteers from their community. On monthly work days, you can find about 20 enthusiastic participants who have been involved from the beginning, working hard under sometimes inclement weather conditions. These volunteers have contributed over 3,200 work hours to date. Their tasks consist of removal of invasive exotics, follow-up control of already cleared areas, and planting of appropriate wetland species. Their efforts are supported by several local institutions. Todd Herschfeldt and Andrea Lipstein, Sarasota County Resource Protection, and Annemarie Post, Extension Agent and coordinator of the UF/IFAS Sarasota County Extension Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Program, provided technical direction for exotic plant removal, and help with plant selection.

This great project was started with limited financial resources, but it soon became clear to the coordinators that in order

to tackle the heavily infested areas additional follow-up funding would be needed. Help arrived in the form of the Sarasota County Neighborhood Grant Program, one of the strategic initiatives adopted by the Sarasota Board of County Commissioners in 2003 to help residents enhance the character, value, safety, health and infrastructure of their neighborhoods. To accomplish this goal, the commissioners set aside \$200,000 per year to fund neighborhood projects. Grant cycles occur twice a year in the spring and fall with \$100,000 available each

cycle. It is a 50/50 matching grant program; 100% of the grant value must be matched either with direct funds, other grants, and/or volunteer labor (at \$12/hr.). A maximum of \$12,000 can be awarded to participants. For more information about this grant program, visit <http://www.scgov.net/PlanningandDevelopment/NeighborhoodServices/Grants.asp>

The Calusa Lakes group received a total of about \$75,000 over several grant cycles through the Sarasota County Neighborhood Grant program, and received another \$9,000 through the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Grant program from the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program (see www.sarasotabay.org for more information).

Their commitment to restore the preserve areas was recognized in 2006 when the group received the Sarasota County Conservation Award for Community Initiative. At the time of writing, this group has removed 70%-80% of invasive exotic plants from their preserve areas and they are currently working on a Management Plan under the direction of Sarasota County Resource Protection. Their enthusiasm has also spilled over to their neighbor, Mission Valley Golf Course. Plans are underway for a collaborative effort to remove invasive exotic plants between the Calusa Lakes Community and this golf course.

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