



KEN MEROP

Tame Your Exotic Side – Plant Native!

by Corine E. Burgess

Clell Ford shows the difference in the size of the potato bulbils.

AIR POTATO is a hearty vine native to Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. It came to the sunshine state around 1905. Some believe that it was brought over on slave ships from Africa. However it got here, since the early days of its arrival it has spread throughout Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Hawaii and Puerto Rico.

Air potato is actually a member of the yam family. Because it can displace native species and disrupt natural processes, it has been listed by FLEPPC since 1993 as one of Florida's most invasive plant species. It was placed on the Florida Noxious Weed List by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in 1999, making it illegal to propagate, transport or possess.

Air potato invades a variety of natural areas in Florida including pinelands and hammocks. It grows roughly 8 inches per day and climbs to the tops of trees to form a mat that shades out the native plants in its path. New plants develop from bulbils that form on the plant and serve as a means of dispersal. Once the bulbils fall and are buried under the soil and leaf litter, they are difficult to see and dig up. Even though the stems and foliage die back in the winter, the bulbils remain viable and a new plant can sprout from each one. Even a bulbil the size of a pea can start a new plant.

Braving low temperatures and icy rain, many Highlands County, Florida citizens came out to do some trading on January 9th. “Tame your exotic side – plant native” was the theme of the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District’s (HSWCD) “Air Potato Exchange Day.” Folks were encouraged to bring a minimum of one bag of air potato bulbils in exchange for a free native plant. Many shapes, sizes and varieties of native plants were offered thanks to the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council’s Kathy Craddock Burks Education and Outreach Grant. The goal of the event was to educate as many people as possible about the impacts of invasive, exotic plants and, specifically, air potato.

Leading up to the January 9th event were four workshops designed to educate people about invasive exotic species. Many plants and animals were discussed at the workshops, but the main focus was the air potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*). Door prizes were awarded to attendees and lots of handouts were available.

The day of the big event dawned wet and gloomy. In spite of the weather, staff and volunteers began to show up early to unload a truck with hundreds of native plants at the Bert J. Harris Agriculture Center. Donned in raincoats, hats, gloves and other warm clothing, volunteers and staff members got to work even though everyone thought there wouldn't be much turnout on such a cold and wet day.

But a little bad weather didn't stop our courageous citizens, old and young alike. The first customer of the day was Ray Drury, a friendly guy who had collected a whopping 70 pounds of potatoes. He was excited about the event and said there



Chase, Bradley and Grandfather Jerry Pendarvis won the grand prize for collecting the most air potato bulbils (189 lbs.) The rain barrel was donated by the Master Gardeners and painted by Penny Bucher.

were plenty more bulbils where those came from. Mr. Pendarvis, the grandpa of two young tykes who collected the most bulbils, stated, "I had my grandkids out there with me every day for two weeks collecting these bulbils." Throughout the day, many folks had lots of great questions about invasive plants, took home informative literature and asked if this would be an annual event.

When the event concluded at 2:00 p.m., over 1,000 pounds of air potato bulbils had been collected and hundreds of native plants had been given away. It was encouraging to see the good folks of Highlands County not only take ownership of their natural resources, but come out in such foul weather to join in the exchange day.

The following Monday, judges gathered to decide on the most (by weight), largest, smallest and most unique air potatoes. Prizes were awarded to the winners. The Pendarvis family won for the most air potatoes collected: 189 pounds! Ray Drury won for the most unique potato, which looked like a face. Two awards were given out for the smallest bulbils, each so tiny that it was difficult to determine a winner. Those two prizes went to Joyce Quiel and Patty Lloyd. Finally, the largest potato award was given to Susan Volpitta; her bulbil weighed in at 1 pound 10.9 oz.

Removing bulbils from the ground is a good start to eliminating this invader. Because of the workshops, flyers, posters, news articles, interviews and even a radio spot, all of which credited the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council's generous grant, citizens began to call and ask questions about not only air potato, but other plants. Neighborhoods and the media began to take an interest.

Our inaugural air potato exchange was so successful that we hope to make it an annual event. Approximately 100 people attended the workshops and thousands have been informed through articles and media coverage. If we can continue to educate our citizens, motivate them with free plants and prizes, get them excited about competitions and cleaning up their environment, perhaps we can truly make a difference and stop, or at least slow down, these aggressive invaders!

As with any successful event, the folks that put it all together are the ones who deserve the credit. Thanks go to the Ridge Rangers, Earth Team volunteers, and HSW-CD staff. Special thanks to Ridge Rangers Jeanne Gossman, Patty Lloyd, Kenneth Merop and Daniel Wilson, Earth Team volunteers Edward Cunningham, Eric Maron, Gerald and Pat Hibbs, and participating staff from the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District, Corine Burgess, Jackie Bailey and Clell Ford.

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Staff and volunteers sit on air potatoes collected during the Air Potato Exchange Day on January 9, 2010. Back row from left to right: Daniel Wilson, Clell Ford, Ken Merop, Jeanne Gossman Front row from left to right: Jackie Bailey, Corine Burgess, Gerald Hibbs and Patty Lloyd

Way to go G'ville!

Nearly 1,200 eager participants braved the rain to remove 13,270 pounds of air potatoes, 1,740 pounds of other invasive plants, and one full 20-yard construction dumpster of trash from sites throughout Gainesville, Florida at the 11th Annual Great Air Potato Roundup!

Volunteers that helped in the Great Air Potato Roundup made a positive difference by helping to create healthier, more balanced ecosystems and therefore a healthier and more balanced planet.

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Participants display tee-shirts given away at the Great Air Potato Roundup in Gainesville, Florida.