

Putting a Stop to the Cat-claw Vine Infestation in Gainesville

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In a community so protective of its environment that hundreds of people will work together annually to collect tons of Air-potato tubers to slow the spread of that well-known invasive weedy vine, there is a need for a greater understanding of an even more severe threat: the Cat-claw vine (*Macfadyena unguis-cati*).

The Cat-claw vine is a plant from the American tropics found only rarely in cultivation. But wherever it is planted, serious trouble soon follows.

The plant is a liana, a woody vine very much like its relative, the native orange-flowered Trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*). As soon as the seeds germinate, the young plant begins to form a subterranean tuber, which increases in size each year, providing food storage for future growth.

The stems creep up the trunks of trees by curious three-clawed hooks at the tip of each pinnately compound leaf. When the stems reach sunlight at the top of the canopy, large tubular bright yellow flowers are formed each spring—usually unseen until they fall to the ground below. The flowers are followed by foot-long capsules, which release innumerable winged seeds, thus further spreading the plants.

Cat-claw vine is now known as an escaped plant in 10 Florida counties, from Leon (Tallahassee) in the north to Miami-Dade in the south. It was completely unknown in the 1930s, when the standard book on southeastern flora was written (1). The first record of it outside of cultivation was a specimen found in 1957, climbing a

Royal palm in Paradise Key, Everglades National Park. At almost the same time, a specimen was collected from a cultivated plant on the University of Florida campus.

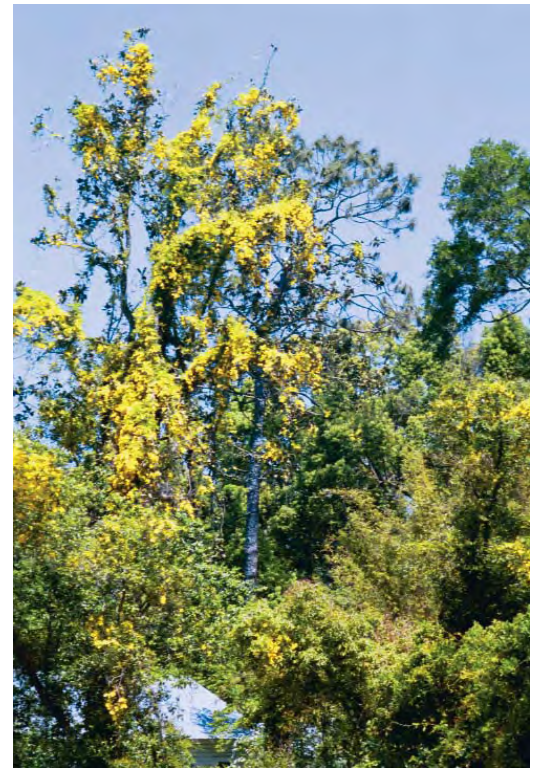
The Cat-claw vine is far more rapid growing and difficult to eradicate than the pestiferous Air-potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*). It forms impenetrable tangles of wiry, twisted stems, all with the small claw-bearing leaves, catching other plants, clothing or human skin. The stems can be cut, of course, but almost within the week, new stems sprout up from the tuber beneath the ground.



In the Gainesville area in north central Florida, there are several centers of Cat-claw infestation. The initial planting on the University of Florida campus has spread out of control onto trees south and west of the main campus. Plants have somehow reached the depths of San Felasco Hammock several miles to the north, where their eradication may now be impossible.

Some foolish soul brought plants to the UF president's house, where the thicket of tangled vines has become so dense that even the university's physical plant maintenance personnel have given up attempting to destroy it. Could recent rumors of the UF president shopping for an off-campus home have anything to do with this pestiferous plant?

A convenient place from which to view the impact of Cat-claw in a residential area is in my own neighborhood just north of the UF campus and golf course. The seeds are now wafting up the street, onto other properties, as well as onto the wood-



Cat-claw in tree canopy

ed fringe of the university's popular bat house field, and are causing the expenditure of many dollars just to hold them in check.

Cat-claw can be killed by herbicides, but that treatment can also kill the supporting trees. Knowing what the vine looks like, appreciating what devastation it is able to produce and taking unremitting prompt action to destroy the plants and tubers are the only means of fighting it.

If these efforts are not successful, those who love Florida and its diversified and beautiful plant life must look forward to a landscape of woodlands that can be penetrated only by carved-out tunnels through a green, tangled hell. If that day eventually comes, those of us who have not fled will remember the days when our worst plant enemy was the loopy, amiable, relatively benign Air-potato.

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(1) Small, J.K. 1933. *Manual of the Southeastern Flora*. Published by author, New York City.