

Invasive Exotics – NIMBY! (Not in my back yard)

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This battle is being waged everyday in neighborhoods up and down the Florida Keys with the invasion of invasive exotic plants. An “exotic” plant is one not native to the Keys but rather was introduced either by accident or intentionally by humans. The exotic species becomes “invasive” when it is capable of out-competing native plants for the same food and habitat. This loss of native habitat also negatively affects native animal populations.

What can you do to protect our native plants? Begin by identifying the plants on your property and determining if they are considered invasive. When shopping for plants at your local nursery, make sure you do not buy any invasives. The Florida Keys Invasive Exotics Task Force has created a list of Florida Keys invasive exotics. The list is broken down into three categories.

- Category One: Invasive Exotics that are altering Florida Keys native plant communities by displacing native species, changing community structures or ecological functions, or hybridizing with natives.
- Category Two: Invasive Exotics that have increased in abundance but have not altered plant communities.
- Category Three: Invasive Exotics that have not yet become a problem in the Keys but are to be watched.

In the Keys, the following five plants are responsible for the majority of habitat loss:

Australian Pine, Brazilian Pepper (a/k/a Florida Holly), Asiatic Colubrina, Lead tree, and Scaevola.

- **Australian Pine, *Casuarina equisetifolia*:** Introduced in the late 1800s as a windbreak and shade tree. Salt tolerant, fast grower, produces large quantities of needle litter that chemically prevents growth of other plants. During high wind events the large tree can topple over landing on power lines and houses.
- **Brazilian Pepper, *Schinus terebinthifolius*:** Introduced in the 1840s as an ornamental shrub. At maturity, the berries are bright red. It is fire, flood, and

drought resistant and is widely spread by birds and raccoons. This plant forms dense woody thickets that shade out native vegetation.

- **Asiatic Colubrina, *Colubrina asiatica*:** Introduced to Jamaica in the 1850s by East Asian immigrants as a medicine, food, fish poison, and soap substitute. Its salt tolerant seeds floated to neighboring islands reaching the Keys in the 1930s. It develops into a dense forming mat of shiny-leafed vegetation that grows over and shades out native vegetation.
- **Lead tree, *Leucaena leucocephala*:** Originated in Mexico and Central America. It is a leguminous tree that fixes nitrogen into the soil, provides a food source for cattle, and has wood used for fuel wood and lumber. Each seed pod produces up to 15 seeds, each tree produces 1,000 seeds a year, and each seed remains viable for 6 years! It is invading along US 1, right-of-ways, private lots, and public conservation areas. The leaves resemble those of the Royal Poinciana.
- **Scaevola, *Scaevola sericea*:** Recent introduction from Hawaii. In the 1980s it was encouraged in beach stabilization projects. It produces a white colored seed that is salt tolerant and floats to new colonization sites. It has begun to displace rare native beach plants, such as the Inkberry, *Scaevola plumeri* and the endangered Sea Lavender, *Tournefortia gnaphalodes*.

Removal of invasive exotic trees from your property helps to conserve our natural resources by removing potential invading seed sources that would germinate and take over native habitat. But this is only half of the equation. After removal of an invasive exotic, you need to replant with appropriate native species. Many migratory birds depend on the Florida Keys as their feeding grounds to survive crossing the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea. By planting a variety of native plant species on your property, you will help insure an abundance of edible seeds at the appropriate time of year and you will enjoy an opportunity to watch the migratory birds.

The easiest method for removing invasive exotics is by hand pulling or digging the plant out. Once the plant has grown too large to be easily removed, then it needs to be cut down to ground level and the stump treated with an herbicide. The most effective herbicides are those containing trichlopyr. This is marketed under various trade names

such as Garlon 4, Pathfinder II, Enforcer, and Ortho Brush B-Gone. They should be applied according to label specifications to avoid misuse. The products vary in the concentration of the active ingredient trichlopyr, as well as in container size. Using the lower concentrations may require you to retreat the stump. It is best to chip or cut the plant into manageable sections immediately. Australian Pines become like iron if left to dry out.

Prior to removing invasive exotics, contact your local government office for regulations and permits to avoid removing misidentified trees. For those in Key West, contact the City of Key West Landscaping Department at 305-809-3768 for invasive exotic removal regulations. In unincorporated Monroe County, a free permit is required. First call the County Biologist at 305-289-2537 to find out which species can be removed. Then go to your nearest Building Department with photos of the trees you want removed and fill out a free tree permit.