

Air Potato Round-up Time
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The tenth annual National Invasive Weed Awareness Week will be held February 21 through February 27 in our nation's capital. Educators, land planners, scientists and others will participate in meetings to educate elected officials and policymakers about the impact invasive weeds have on the environment and economy.

Invasive weeds/plants are categorized as plants from someplace else that spread to areas outside of where they were planted. These plants can alter natural areas by choking out native vegetation and change the natural processes such as fire and water flow.



One invasive plant that has really affected our natural areas and roadside landscapes is the air potato. Now is a great time to reduce the numbers of these plants and your help is needed.

An air potato roundup is scheduled for February 28 from 9AM to Noon. You can help by volunteering at various sites throughout the area or by working on your own property or the common areas in your neighborhood. Volunteer sites scheduled for cleanup include Tree Hill, Jacksonville Zoo & Gardens, Crosby Sanctuary of the Duval Audubon Society, Howell Park, Jacksonville Arboretum, Tillie Fowler Regional Park, Egan's Creek Greenway, Fort Mose State park, and UNF. For more info, visit www.nature.org/floridainvasive or call the The Nature Conservancy Office at 904-598-0004. No registration is necessary unless you are bringing a large group so if interested, just head over to work at one of the sites the day of the event. Who knows, you may collect the largest tuber and become the recipient of the grand prize. The grand prize is a guided kayak tour for two and the children's prize is a membership basket to the Jacksonville Zoo. If you can't participate but want to help, look around your neighborhood, identify these plants and take the appropriate control measures.

The air potato, *Dioscorea bulbifera*, was brought to the Americas from Africa during slave trade and was later introduced into Florida in 1905. In 1993, the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council listed air potato as one of Florida's most invasive plant species. In 1999, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services placed it on the Florida Noxious Weed List. Plants on this list cannot be introduced, possessed, moved, or released without a permit.

These tall vining plants can be found throughout the state of Florida. They reach sixty feet in height and often use trees for support. Vines twine to the left in a counterclockwise pattern. Aboveground portions die back to the ground in winter.

Heart-shaped leaves are eight inches or more long with prominent veins attached to long petioles (leaf stem), and are spaced alternate each other along the stem. Another closely related Florida Noxious Weed is the winged or white yam (*Dioscorea alata*), which is similar in appearance, but leaves along the stem of the winged yam are opposite one another. Stem cross-sections of air potato are round to slightly angled whereas the winged yam is square. Although flowers are unusual in Florida, they have been observed in north Florida and are small, fragrant, greenish and hang in four-inch long panicles.

Plants die back during the winter as underground tubers store food for the spring revival. However, the main reason these plants are so invasive is because they produce many aerial tubers (bulbils) in the leaf axils. Tubers are almost round (up to five inches by four inches), smooth in appearance, and are gray to tan in color. Size ranges from pebble or pea-size up to the size of an Irish potato. Each aerial tuber falls to the ground to produce a new plant plus the parent plant comes back from an underground tuber. Once these plants get established, they have the potential to form a solid wall of vines taking over everything in their path.

Control: Air potato vines have been nipped by the cold and all that is visible are the bare vines with the aerial bulbils. Pull down the vines if possible and collect the bulbils at the same time. Remember to check the ground and below leaf litter for any bulbils that have fallen. Don't put bulbils in with yard trash but send to a lined landfill. The other option is to freeze them if you have adequate freezer space.

When the plant comes back in the spring from underground tubers, begin spray treatments by applying the herbicide glyphosate (i.e. Round up®) to the leaves. Do not spray on windy days or to desirable plant material because it too will be damaged. Glyphosate is absorbed by green leaves, through thin-barked trees (maples, dogwoods), or wounds. Because multiple applications of glyphosate are needed for adequate control, spray leaves several times throughout the growing season. However, the best time to treat is late in the growing season (August through October) before short days kick in triggering leaves to turn yellow. As short days occur, plants move carbohydrates and the foliar applied glyphosate to underground tubers. Once the plant is treated with an herbicide, do not pull up or cut back for three to four weeks. This will give the herbicide time to move throughout the plant, increasing its effectiveness.