

The Dread Air Potato

These invasive plants were introduced years ago and still are sold across the USA. They have been designated a "Noxious Weed" by Florida Dept. of Agriculture.

An air potato vine can totally blanket and kill any plant, bush, or tree in just weeks.

For the last year and a half, after I realized the threat this plant was to my property, I have engaged in an eradication program, during which I have discovered some traits that could be useful to all S. Florida residents.

The rear of my property is slightly depressed and contains a variety of mostly native plants as a border visual screen. I do not clean out fallen leaves, fronds or cuttings, so the floor is a heavy mat of decaying litter.

I first noticed the plants' aggressive behavior about 5 years ago but only removed the most obvious growths. Unbeknownst to me, several had climbed a tall tree (gulf licaria) and were dropping tubers all over that area. Again, no cause for alarm, since nothing was sprouting. Now, years later, they are coming up everywhere and I started my program.

Some observations:

1. the heavily-veined, matte bright green, heart-shaped leaves are very distinctive.
2. small 1-2" leaves mean recently sprouted very small tubers, between invisible and 1/4"
3. large leaves, up to 6", mean a big potato is under the surface.
4. growth can be very rapid, up to 6" per day, in favorable conditions
5. you have to gently pull the entire tuber with root bundle and all out or you waste your time.
6. the big potatoes usually pull out easily; small ones break off about half the time.
7. technique; you grasp the stem firmly and rhythmically tug vertically (not sideways). You will quickly discover the correct amount of needed force for a given stem/leaf size.
8. take away everything you pull. Short vines without roots can re-establish if left on the ground.
9. large potatoes are usually found at a depth of many inches, suggesting they are real 'time bombs' sprouting years after falling. The big ones are also the fastest growing when they decide to sprout.
10. in the early wet season you must check the affected area almost daily or they will get out of control. A concerted eradication effort of a few weeks has great impact on proliferation. I am confident that a couple of these efforts at the right times of the year will eliminate the pest, though late-sprouting buried tubers

demand occasional inspection (easy because the large buried individuals make the big leaves). My 'yield' has substantially declined over the past weeks in constantly identical weather conditions.

11. you must also inspect and address neighboring land for signs of spreading since if left free they will eventually re-enter your property. A big windstorm is the chief agent of wider spread of the invasion. The wind breaks off countless large and small developing tubers from the vines and spreads them far afield, the higher the source, the farther the spread. They all have equal potential for invasion regardless of size.

12. I am not the only one who can do this. Many households have retired or stay-at-home members who can undertake a program like mine. It is **IMPORTANT** and **NOT DIFFICULT**.

Your neighbor, John Kessler