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Invasion of the Exotic Species
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Florida is under attack! Exotic plants are invading our natural areas, waterbodies, and parks. According to the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council, “an exotic plant is a plant that has been introduced to an area from outside its native range, either purposefully or accidentally.” You may not realize it, but exotics may be in your landscape! What is so bad about that? When these exotic plants become established, they may take over and crowd out native plants because the natural predators that keep the exotic plant in check are not present. An example is the Australian pine. This fast growing exotic is extremely aggressive by sterilizing the soil, which makes it unsuitable for growth of other plants. Since it is tall, it shades out native plants that require adequate amounts of sunlight, and native wildlife suffers because the pines do not produce a food source for them. Finally, Australian pines alter the environment by using more water than native plants, which may delete water resources. Although an exotic plant may be appealing, it may be harmful.

Exotic species negatively impact our economy as well. The State of Florida spends millions of dollars each year to control these species. Waterways can become clogged with exotic aquatic plants, which make them impassable. This impacts recreational boating, commerce, and commercial fishing. Funds are spent to control exotic species in natural areas to preserve their functions and value.

You can help stop this phenomenon by planting native species in your landscape. Native plants are more energy efficient because they require less irrigation and fertilization since they are adapted to the soils, temperature, and rainfall patterns of the area. In addition, maintenance is low because native plants are resistant to pests and diseases that evolved along with them. To gain these benefits, it is necessary to do some research because the right plant needs to be in the right place. For example, a sweetbay tree that likes a lot of light should not be planted in a shading area of the lawn.

Your local extension service is a good place to start researching the best native plants for your situation. In order to be successful in establishing native plants, there are several things that should be done:

- Remove any exotic plants from your lawn or at least the fruits.
- Determine the soil type.
- Find out what nutrients are already present in the soil, which can be done by submitting a sample to the University of Florida/IFAS Soil Testing Laboratory.
- Survey your yard for areas of standing water, areas of salt spray,
- Based on your findings, select appropriate native plants.
- Plant the plants and watch them grow!

By establishing native plants in your landscape, you are helping slow down the invasion of exotic plants. But you don't have to do it alone; your local extension service can assist you throughout this process.