

Indian River County
1028 20th Place, Suite D, Vero Beach, Florida 32960
(772) 770-5030 Fax: (772) 770-5148 <http://indian.ifas.ufl.edu>

Getting Rid of Brazilian Peppertrees

By: Janet Bargar, Water Quality Agent

Brazilian peppertree is one of many names like Christmasberry and Florida holly that make it sound like a nice plant, but that isn't the case. This shrub-like tree, which can grow up to 30 feet tall, is an invasive plant that aggressively takes over areas. You may have seen it along roadsides, in conservation areas, or your own landscape. The leaves are elliptic-oblong, one to two inches long, with upper surfaces dark green, and bottom surfaces paler. The leaf veins are lighter in color. When the leaves are crushed, they smell peppery or like turpentine. The berries grow in clusters, start out glossy green, and then turn bright red from October through December. The peppertree also has a short trunk that gives way to long, intertwining branches.

So, why is it here?

In the late 19th century, this native of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil was introduced to Florida as a landscape ornamental plant and became popular because of its bright red berries. However, the plant did not have any natural enemies in Florida and spread throughout central and south portions of the state. It now occupies over 700,000 acres, which includes the Everglades National Park. The plant colonizes areas where soil has been disturbed or fire is suppressed and quickly crowds out native plants to form dense Brazilian peppertree forests, which are poor habitats for native animals and plants.

Although we mainly see Brazilian peppertrees in large areas, the plant can also pop up in your landscape through dispersal by raccoons, opossums, and fruit-eating birds such as robins. In order to help prevent it from spreading, we need to control these peppertrees. Although the first thing we may want to do is simply cut them down, this does not get rid of the plant because it will continue to grow from the stump unless an herbicide is applied. First cut the trunk of the plant as close to the ground as possible. Then within 5 minutes carefully apply an herbicide that contains the active ingredient glyphosate or triclopyr to the part of the stump that is closest to the bark. When working around Brazilian peppertrees, be careful not to touch the wood because you may develop a rash since it is related to poisonwood, poison oak, and poison ivy. Even smoke from burning the wood is toxic!

If you don't want to take a chance of getting a rash, herbicides may be applied directly to the bark or leaves. An herbicide that contains the active ingredient triclopyr ester and is mixed with penetrating oil should be applied to the peppertree's bark one-half to one foot from the ground. This method is best during the plant's flowering period, but visible results may take several weeks. The third control method is applying an herbicide that contains glyphosate and triclopyr as its active ingredient to the leaves of the Brazilian peppertree. This technique needs to be used with caution because it uses more herbicide than the others and has the potential to harm neighboring plants due to wind drift.

When using a herbicide or any pesticide, you must follow the label instructions because it is against the law to use a pesticide in a manner that isn't consistent with the label. If you apply a pesticide to someone else's property, you may be required under Florida law to obtain a pesticide applicator license before applying a pesticide. Your local county extension service can help you determine if a license is necessary along with providing more information about Brazilian peppertrees, how to control them, and herbicide applications. The wildlife and native plants will thank you for helping control this highly invasive plant.