

## Don't Import Pests

I recently visited a Caribbean Island. At the fruit and vegetable market I over-heard two Floridians discussing taking mangoes back to the United States. I walked over to them and introduced myself and told them they need a Phyto-sanitary certificate to bring back fruits and other plants and animal products. They did not see anything wrong with their attempted illicit imports. What's the big deal about bringing fruits illegally from one country to another?

My mind went back to in the 1980's when there was an outbreak of mealy bugs in the Caribbean. At that time, it was of the belief that the wife of a diplomat in Grenada went to China and brought home a plant infested with mealybug. Mealybugs spread to other Caribbean countries and created havoc on the plants. In 2009, the kudzu bug that feasts on kudzu and soybean was accidentally introduced to Georgia. It is believed that the kudzu bugs came through the airport in luggage from an Asian country. In Florida, the Giant African Snail was illegally imported from East Africa and used for religious rituals. These snails became major pests to Florida agriculture industry; they feed on fruits, vegetables and ornamental plants. Small farmers have seen their crops disappear down overnight. There are so many other pests in Florida that we cannot pinpoint their origin. USDA is on a campaign to keep mango seed weevil and the Mediterranean fruit fly from establishing in the US.

In 2016 more than 113 million tourists visited Florida, plus residents who travelled to other countries. Some of these tourists accidentally brought in exotic insects or their eggs. Because these insects are not native to our state and we cannot identify pesticides that are available to control these insects. By the time we find an effective pesticide, our crops may already be wiped out. This means that we must increase our food imports from other countries and from other states which will cause great economic loss to the Florida economy. I know many will say they look for insects before taking the plant material but our eyes are not good enough to detect insect eggs, larvae and adults. These may actually be imbedded in the fruit. There are guidelines set by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) on how to treat plant materials before importing them to the US. You can receive this guideline by acquiring trainings from USDA and receiving a Phyto-sanitary certificate which will give you the privilege to import plant materials. Illegally taking in a piece of ornamental plant into the United States is just as wrong as taking a mango. Florida has a "don't pack a pest" campaign that is designed to educate travelers on the danger of introducing exotic and invasive insects into our state.

It is important to note that exotic pests can be more destructive to our plants than native insects. The problems with importing pests is not only from foreign countries but also from state to state. There are pests that are found in the northern region of the US that are not present in Florida. Bringing plants infested with pests may result in them feeding on our beneficial insects. Beware; because a plant grows beautiful in California does not mean it is going to grow likewise in Florida. These two areas have different growing

conditions. Everyday people take plants across state line without knowing that they might be introducing new pest. Stop! Don't take a stranger home.

For more information on this or any other related horticulture topic, contact Grantly Ricketts at UF/IFAS Extension in Osceola County at 321-697-3000 or email at [gricketts@ufl.edu](mailto:gricketts@ufl.edu).