Residents of Central Florida are all too familiar with "exotic invasive visitors". Seems like the same time you send out change of address cards, everyone decides to come visit. And some stay longer than others.

The same is true for invasive exotic plant and animal species that have taken up residence here. We have a variety of unwanted guests that are not human that move into our yards and natural areas costing gardeners and taxpayers millions of dollars in labor and chemical controls.

One effective method of exotic pest management is "exclusion" or keeping pests out of our country. The Florida Department of Agriculture and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission keep a vigilant watch using intense inspection techniques at our borders for plants and animals that might have a negative impact on our health, our livelihood and the state's economy. They are the second line of defense to prevent germs, plants and critters from infiltrating as they inspect shipments of cargo and luggage coming in from overseas.

The first line of defense is you and I. We need to be sure we cooperate and don’t inadvertently spread problems by bringing in plants, pets, insects, soil and fruit. When traveling abroad, don’t bring back fresh fruit because it can carry insect larva or disease that are not already found here. Plants and fruit shipped back home must be ordered from shippers that follow proper sanitation and fumigation practices. Tropical countries are a major source of stock material or cuttings for the horticulture trade but they must be free of soil to prevent disease organisms, insects and nematodes from being imported as well.

One invasive species familiar to home gardeners is the air potato. It is a nuisance relative of the edible yam popular in Latino cuisine. Heart shaped leaves and a vining habit made this a popular landscape plant. Once established, it produces vines that totally cover fences and nearby trees, eliminating sunlight and eventually killing the plant it uses as a ladder. It produces aerial tubers that look like potatoes. These potatoes fall to the ground when the plant is killed by frost. The tubers sprout in the spring and start the cycle again. The plant is so invasive that many communities have established "potato picking" parties to cut the vines and destroy baskets full of the invasive tubers.

Home gardeners often pull "weeds" that are invasive species. Seedlings of cherry laurel, golden rain tree, Chinese tallow and Brazilian pepper tree are all invasive plants that easily seed into natural areas. There, they create dense monocultures and result in reduced food variety and species diversity. They can create habitat, but do not support the variety of plants and animals that a diverse mixture of native plants can support.

Ranchers have been battling an invasive relative in the nightshade family called tropical soda apple. This plant looks like a scary movie version of eggplant with large one inch long spines protruding from the top and bottom of each leaf. The plant produces egg size fruit that have a mottled green and white color. When cattle and wildlife eat the fruit, seeds are deposited in manure piles, a perfect spot for a new seedling to grow. Carefully remove these spiney weeds from your landscape before they produce fruit.

A new "plant behaving badly" is the Old World Climbing Fern. Its lacy leaves made it prized as a landscape fern, but it has escaped cultivation and has moved into natural areas blanketing acres of woodlands in south Florida requiring chemical application by helicopter.

Home gardeners find it difficult to spend enough time in the garden to rogue out seedlings but it is nearly impossible for natural land managers. We can help by carefully selecting landscape plants that are least likely to "escape" into the wild. Consult with local nurserymen or contact the UF/IFAS Osceola County...
Extension Office for a list of recommended plants for our area. You may also study observations made by natural lands managers, gardeners and nurserymen through the efforts of the Exotic Pest Plant Council (EPPC). They are constantly updating lists of plants based on their invasive characteristics and rank them by how much of a problem they are in different parts of the state.

For more information on exotic invasive species and approved control measures, contact our UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension Office at 321-697-3000.

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