WEEDS IN THE WILD

A weed is often defined as a plant out of place. What might be a wildflower on a roadside is often a pain in the grass (and in the back) as we stoop to have a manicured landscape. Some unwanted weeds like betony, dandelion and lambs quarters are edible. It is all a matter of perspective.

I remember a song my Mom would sing about a "lonely little petunia in an onion patch." I am sure she never thought she was teaching her future horticulturist about weeds while we sang the song. She and Dad taught me about weeds as we pulled periwinkles and Spanish needles from our landscape and bermudagrass from our vegetable garden.

We learn to recognize unwanted plants in our lawns and gardens, but what is a weed in a natural area? How can we distinguish one wild thing from another? Why are some wild things considered "bad"?

As natural areas develop, they change. Wild land managers refer to the process as succession. Wetland plants around lakes die and produce organic debris we call muck. The organic sediment combined with shallow water provides ideal conditions for many vigorous aquatic plants and we soon lose access to the lake as the shoreline vegetation becomes dense.

As more herbaceous, soft-stemmed plants die and produce soil, more and more woody plants can survive. Marsh willows, primrose willow, Carolina willows, red maples and many forbs or herbaceous plants begin to move in. If the soil gets deep enough and the water level lies below the surface, seeds of more upland plants can begin to sprout such as Southern magnolia, swamp bay, tupelo and cypress.

One constant in our natural landscapes is change. Does that sound confusing? It means that a variety of factors influence our natural systems often resulting in transitions from one plant community to another. Depending on how wet an area stays and how often fire moves through, grasslands progress or succeed to shrubs and trees and may change into plant communities such as scrub, pine flatwoods, mesic hammock or oak hammock.

Land managers select a stage of succession and try to manage the fire frequency and hydrology or wet and dry cycle to maintain that type of plant community. In addition to removing drainage canals and prescribed fire, they have to manage for invasive species (weeds and wildlife) that are not normal in the desired plant succession stage.

In natural areas, under normal conditions, leaf litter and pine needles blanket the ground and prevent invasive weed seeds from making soil contact.

If the ground is disturbed, seedlings have open space to sprout. Then a variety of seedlings compete for sunlight, water and nutrients and the strongest survive. In mature forests, soil disturbance may be caused by animal activity like hog rooting. Sunlight conditions change after a fire clears out tree underbrush and canopy or when a large tree falls after a storm. Recently, the high hurricane and tornado winds have caused a lot of trees to topple resulting in large areas of exposed soil. Rapid weed growth is expected in these disturbed areas.

Weeds in the wild, just as in a landscape, are unwanted plants. They usually have the ability to reproduce rapidly with tremendous seed production and may be more adapted to natural growing conditions than our native plants, out competing the plants that have grown there historically.

Many of the undesirable invasive species are exotics, not native to our area. Examples include hydrilla, old world climbing fern, tropical soda apple and skunk vine. They do not have the natural insect pests and diseases that keep them in control in their natural habitat. It is easy for them to spread by birds and other...
wildlife or wind. Since natural areas are so large, management of invasive weed species is very expensive.

It is important to be able to recognize the difference between desirable and undesirable plants, whether in the yard or the wild. The UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension Office has many references to help you recognize invasive plants that are a nuisance in your yard and that can become a major problem in our natural areas. Contact us at 321-697-3000 for information on identification and management.

If you live near natural areas, consider removing invasive species from your landscape. Then, replant with other plants such as some of our native Florida species that are adapted to your growing conditions. You will be helping our land managers control weeds in the wild lands.

Eleanor Foerste
Natural Resources Agent
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
(321) 697-3000
Fax (321) 697-3010
efoe@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
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