

That Infernal Air Potato



Air potato (Dioscorea bulbifera) has attractive glossy foliage and is favored by many gardeners. But the plant quickly becomes invasive under Florida conditions.

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A few weeks ago while I was visiting a friend, she asked me to identify a vine that had recently appeared in her garden. I recognized it at once. It was that infernal air potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera*).

“You’d better pull that thing up immediately!” I cautioned her. “If you allow it to grow, it will overtake everything in your yard!”

I spoke from experience. A few years back I admired the vine growing in a friend’s yard and asked for a start which she willingly gave. The first year I enjoyed its presence in my garden. The second year wasn’t so bad, so I planted some on my back fence. The fourth and fifth years saw its spread to the vacant lot behind mine, and I have begun to fight a seemingly losing battle against the exponential spread of this aggressive pest.

Other people, too, fight constant battles. Each year in Gainesville groups of people get together to remove the vines from natural areas. They vow to “take back their natural areas, one potato at a time.”

On each of my trips to Winter Park , I am amazed at the air potatoes that I see invading our state garden clubs’ headquarters and Meade Gardens next door. Air potato, like kudzu and other exotic invasives, is a monster on the loose that is intent on establishing a monoculture where nothing except itself will grow.

Air potato has spread throughout much of Florida , as well as parts of Louisiana , Mississippi , and Texas . It is a relative of the yam, and it is highly decorative as it climbs up various supports. Any gardener who sees it would want a start—until they learn of its malignant intent. It can reach well into the canopy of trees 60 or more feet tall.

Ridding an area of air potatoes can be an endless, frustrating task. The vines grow as fast as eight inches a day, and tubers of various sizes and shapes form in the axils of the leaves. In late summer and fall as many as 200 of these tubers may drop to the ground from each vine. If not collected, each one will sprout the following spring. Oaks, palms, and other trees are devastated by the vicious vines.

The vine is native to tropical Asia and Africa . It disrupts native plant communities by forming impenetrable

Air potato

vines on native trees and shading out understory vegetation. It therefore negatively impacts wildlife that is dependent on native plants for forage, nesting, and cover. Also, it interferes with ecosystem integrity by threatening biodiversity and ecosystem stability in natural areas.

If the warning is a little late and your property is well on its way to being an air potato jungle, you may wish to consider some control options. The vines can, of course, be hand pulled, and they can be disconnected from the stems to prevent aerial “potato” production. Underground tubers can be dug, placed in a black plastic bag until they have degraded, or they can be burned. Diligence is required. Continue to hand pull all sprouting vines.

If chemical control becomes necessary, the vines can be cut and immediately brushed with a product containing Triclopyr such as Brush-B-Gon®. Green leaves will be killed by the application of Round-up® or other glyphosate products. Use caution and do not get these products on desirable plants.

Triclopyr products, such as Brush-B-Gon®, and glyphosate contained in Roundup® and Rodeo® (labeled for aquatic areas), are available in local garden and hardware stores. Always use herbicides according to the label. The label is the law, and when applied in a manner not conforming to the label, the law is being broken. Of course, the law exists for the protection of the consumer and the environment.

Once we know about the invasive potential of this vine, of course we do not plant it in our landscapes under any circumstances. We never share with our neighbors, even if they ask, and we discourage offers at plant sales and other sources where uninformed people dispense them willingly.

If each of us works to inform all our friends and neighbors of the potential of this vine, maybe we can make some difference to the health of our environment. We must, if we are to continue to enjoy natural areas with diverse plants that sustain wildlife and ultimately even ourselves.

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