

## Exotic Beauties Gone Wild



*Beth Weidner is Park Manager at Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park and member of the Horticulture Advisory Committee. For more local gardening information visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>*

July 5, 2005

**T**his is a cautionary tale about the havoc that can result from too much of a good thing. Years ago, explorers traveled the far reaches of the world, searching for beauties to bring home. Their hunts were successful, and many were imported. The beauties were easily domesticated, and indeed thrived in their new settings. Years of bliss went by, but then, slowly, insidiously, the truth about the beauties was revealed: they had become monsters, taking over everything in their paths and destroying the homes of their once happy masters.

We are talking, of course, about ornamental plants that are not indigenous to our area, and that, in some cases, have taken over entire habitats by displacing the native plants that once grew there.

The Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council (FLEPPC) has listed many such species that are invasive throughout our state. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection has listed a number of species that are prohibited from sale, and others that are available for sale but are considered noxious.

Some of the most commonly grown exotic pest plants in our area include Chinese tallow tree (aka Popcorn tree), camphor tree, coral ardisia, silverthorn, Chinese ligustrum, nandina (aka heavenly bamboo), English ivy, boston fern, climbing fern, Japanese honeysuckle, and there are many others. Some of these, notably tallow tree, have established almost a monoculture in some areas, entirely displacing the native trees that once grew in our forests. For more information on plants listed as invasive species, visit [www.fleppc.org](http://www.fleppc.org).

Many people now promote the use of all native plants for home and commercial landscapes. There are many choices and a beautiful setting can be easily achieved. Some good choices include the native red maple, Shumard oak, Ashe magnolia, Virginia sweetspire, oak-leaf hydrangea, and sweet autumn clematis. However, one need not be a native plant purist, if care is used in selection of exotics that are known to grow politely, and not take over!

## Exotic Beauties Gone Wild

In fact, some of the exotic beauties in our area are so commonly grown, many people think they are native – such as azaleas and camellias. These and a few others are the plants that combine with our natives such as dogwood, pine, liveoak and holly, to create the setting that gives us the happy designation of being the place where spring begins!

As gardeners, we have the right to choose from a wide array of plants. But with that right comes the responsibility to protect our environment by planting and growing those plants that we can enjoy with a clear conscience. Plant explorers are still out there, searching for and bringing home potentially monstrous beauties that can become the next generation nightmare. The good news is that nursery people are now more cautious about evaluating plants before introducing them to the trade. They look for such characteristics as self-seeding, spreading by roots or rhizomes, cold-hardiness, wildlife interactions (birds eat berries and poop them out all over the place!), and other factors that could result in a plant becoming a pest. Still, we must all do our part in eliminating the monsters and avoiding use of potentially invasive exotics.

Maclay Gardens State Park is a wonderful place to see how natives and exotics are used together to create a beautiful landscape. But many of the plants used by Maclay in his design are now known to be invasive, and we are continually working toward control of exotics, with coral ardisia being our worst pest plant. If you'd like to volunteer to help in that effort, or to help with maintenance of our native plant arboretum, please call us at (850) 487-4115.

###