

## Pretty but Dangerous Coral Ardisia



Photos: Coral ardisia has beautiful red berries (Photo by Floridanature.org), but it can quickly overrun a wooded natural area (Photo by Ann Murray, UF).

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**E**xotic invasive plants have been hot topics in Florida in recent years. Ecologists and landowners are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of managing lands in a way that discourages the rampant growth and spread of these plants. Homeowners are learning that how they manage their gardens, including whether or not they plant or allow exotic invasive species to grow in their gardens, affects the health of our planet.

Too, as a writer, I'm sure to become unpopular with a certain segment of the gardening public with articles such as this. Amiable Spouse says that saying bad things about a person's favorite plant is much like kicking their dog, so they take great offense. Usually exotic invasive species have been imported into the United States because they are ornamental. Following an article I wrote about the invasive camphor tree (*Cinamomum camphora*), I received several communications. People were upset because I had spoken ill of one of their favorite plants.

However, I did not make up charges against these plants based on my opinion. They are documented by several government agencies and universities. Their destructive nature is not a matter of guesswork, but of research and documented evidence that these plants are taking over and displacing native species. This creates a monoculture which is harmful to the environment and to creatures that rely on a diversity of plants for their welfare.

One such plant is coral ardisia (*Ardisia crenata*). This invader is ranked as a Category I species by the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council. Plants grow from two to five feet tall and have dark green, glossy leaves, white or pinkish flowers, and clusters of showy scarlet berries. They grow well underneath trees in average to moist soil.

One look at these attractive plants in full berry is enough to make most gardeners want to include them in their

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landscape. Education, however, is the answer to preventing further spread of this problem plant. As gardeners learn to recognize exotic invasive species and become aware of their potential to harm natural areas, they are less likely to allow them in their gardens. Many of us who already have ardisia in our landscapes wish we didn't. If the definition of a weed is "a plant growing where you don't want it to grow", then ardisia is a landscape weed in many cases as it pops up unexpectedly all over the yard.

Coral ardisia poses a significant threat to the ecology of an area. Native plant species diversity is lower where coral ardisia becomes well established. Light is reduced in forest understories. Native groundcovers such as violets and trilliums are eliminated by the closely spaced ardisia plants which grow as thickly as 100 plants per square meter. Plants quickly regrow from the base when they are cut down, and they resprout quickly after a forest fire.

For a time, coral ardisia was touted as a good plant for bird gardens because the red berries are attractive to birds such as cedar waxwings and mockingbirds. Dispersal by the birds into natural areas soon dispelled that myth. Seeds germinate readily, have a high rate of germination, and are viable for a long time. Loads of volunteer seedlings can be found around established plants, and plants become established wherever birds fly after consuming the berries.

Coral ardisia is native to Japan and parts of northern India . At present it is naturalized on two islands in Hawaii . In Florida it has invaded natural areas in several counties, and it has been reported in Texas where it dominates the understory in parts of two reserves.

In Gainesville , Florida , at Colclough Pond City Nature Park , ardisia and other invasives are treated with a low volume basal herbicide application with Garlon 4 in JLB Oil (a ready-to-use basal oil that eliminates the need for diesel and kerosene). A red or blue dye is used to make identification of treated stems easier. Or, a 15% solution is sprayed as a basal bark treatment. Though Garlon is not available in small quantities for home gardener use, its active ingredient, triclopyr, can be found in a number of brush killer type herbicides available in most local garden centers. Follow label directions carefully.

If the beautiful coral berry grows in your garden, duty to the environment demands that you destroy it. Sometimes we just have to swallow our medicine and get over it.

At a Glance

*Ardisia crenata*

Say: ar-DIZ-ee-uh kre-NAY-tuh

Family: Myrsinaceae (Myrsine Family)

Other Names: Coralberry, Christmas berry, Hilo holly, marlberry, ardisia

Size: 2-6 feet tall

Native Range : Japan to N. India

Zones: 7-10

FLEPPC Rank: Category I

Other Lists:

HEAR (Hawaiian Ecosystems at Risk)

PIER ( Pacific Islands Ecosystems at Risk)

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