

STAMP OUT BRAZILIAN PEPPER!

by Paul and Sherry Cummings

The Florida Native Plant Society has a goal of educating the public to the advantages of using native plants in landscaping. The Society should also take some responsibility, however, for the opposite side of the coin: that is, the problem of educating the public to the *disadvantages* of the troublesome non-native plant, making every effort to see that they are removed from the landscape scene.

Some of the most common and destructive non-native trees in Florida are the melaleuca, the Australian pine, and the Brazilian pepper. These exotics are lush and fertile trees. They are so fertile, in fact, that they crowd out the native species. They were introduced as landscape and windbreak plants, but adapted so well that they quickly escaped cultivation. They now dominate the areas in which they grow, creating their own monoculture, to the exclusion of native plants and many wildlife species.

Of these exotics, Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*) deserves our primary attention, for a number of reasons. It is widely distributed in the moist soils of peninsular Florida, occupying many sites formerly inhabited by native vegetation. Its growth pattern is



such that it covers large areas of ground completely, shading out and eliminating any plants that might try to grow under it. It belongs to the same family as poison ivy and presents the same hazard of causing skin reactions in humans.

It has the cosmetic advantage over the other two primary exotic pest trees by having red berries and reminding us of holly. In fact, it is commonly referred to as Florida holly. Because of this, many uninitiated people think of

it as both beautiful and native, and, therefore, desirable both in landscaping and in attracting birds.

In an effort to begin to eliminate this troublesome pest, it is important to wage a war against it on three levels. The first step is to discourage the use of the term Florida holly. Whenever we hear or see the Brazilian pepper incorrectly referred to as Florida holly, we should ensure that the speaker or writer is made aware of the error, and knows the reason for our distaste with this incorrect name. The elimination of the term Florida holly from our vocabulary will go a long way toward the eradication of this tree.

Secondly, landscape architects, authors of landscape books, and nurserymen should be made aware of the drawbacks of this plant, both in cultivation and in the wild. Properly informed, they should make valuable allies in our battle. Our goal here is to stop the Brazilian pepper from being recommended for landscaping by *any source* and to discourage reproduction and sale by the nursery trade.

Lastly, whenever we see a seedling growing in the wild, we should *pull it up* to keep it from spreading.

Working together against this troublesome tree, we may accomplish the seemingly impossible task of keeping the Brazilian pepper from taking over the entire southern part of peninsular Florida.

Won't you help?