



# Exotic Plants



Skunk Vine quickly carpets everything in sight.

Florida's subtropical climate allows for a wonderful selection when landscaping your home, but what was planted as a beautiful ornamental plant may become very destructive when it escapes your yard and invades preserve lands. Examples of plants that are causing problems in our area include Brazilian Pepper, Chinese tallow, Air Potato Vine, Skunk Vine, Australian Pine, Carrotwood Tree and many others. If such species are allowed to grow in yards adjacent to a park or preserve, they will inevitably spread into the natural area. Many of these plants can reproduce from yard clippings and prunings that are carelessly tossed into the

woods and quickly become very difficult to eradicate. We ask all homeowners, but especially those who live along preserve boundaries, to embrace the wide selection of Florida's native plants in your landscaping. As an added benefit these plants are also naturally harder and easier to maintain since they do not come from a different environment.

Homeowners should take special care to avoid the following exotic plants:

## Brazilian Pepper

Originally sold for its trademark ornamental berries, Brazilian Pepper soon overran local ecosystems. Brazilian Pepper grows in such dense stands that it easily chokes out all other vegetation. Pruning is ineffective, it can only be controlled by methodical application of herbicides.



Australian Pine along a beach above, and a close-up of the needles and seeds below.



## Australian Pine

Favoring sandy soils and ample sunlight, Australian Pine is most common in coastal communities and especially along beaches. As their fallen needles decompose, a toxin is released into the soil that poisons all other plants, even the relentless Brazilian Pepper.

## Skunk Vine

Deserving of its name, Skunk Vine is notorious for two reasons: smelling absolutely horrible and quickly canvassing local vegetation. Skunk Vine should be removed immediately upon sight or the homeowner will soon be overrun by this stinky nuisance.



Courtesy Army Corps of Engineers

Above, the Florida and National distribution of Brazilian Pepper. The telltale red berries are below.



# Fire Lanes

The Tampa Bay area's natural lands are periodically burned to control undergrowth, revitalize the soils, and protect native fire-resistant plants from exotics. One critical requirement for this process is the Fire Lane. These sandy lanes remove the fire's fuel source and prevent it from burning any further. In order to protect structures adjacent to preserve lands, these fire lanes must be kept clear at all times. By cluttering up fire lanes residents are unintentionally endangering their own homes. Several situations of common fire lane violations follow below:



In the prescribed burn above the fire lane has clearly stopped the progression of the fire and protected the houses visible in the background.

## Yard Waste

Yard waste should never be dumped into a fire lane as it compromises the firebreak and provides the fire a direct path into your yard. Protect yourself and others by keeping these lanes clear!

## Debris

Residents decide out of sight is out of mind and dispose of construction materials, lumber scraps, and other debris over the fence onto preserve lands.



## Structures

On other preserves where there may be no fence line, residents have been known to erect structures like sheds and swing sets on the fire lanes, taking advantage of the cleared areas.

## Vehicles / Trailers

It may seem convenient to park a trailer or spare vehicle in a fire lane, but it can become a serious problem when a fire crew arrives to conduct a burn and the owner cannot be found.

# Contact Information

For information about the specific agency or office responsible for managing a natural area in the Tampa Bay region, please contact:

Wildlife Fellowship, Inc.  
(813) 671-0957  
heathr@wildfellow.org

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# Pets & Exotic Animals

Domestic pets can cause serious problems if allowed to range inside preserve boundaries. Cats are efficient predators capable of decimating preserve bird, reptile, and small mammal populations. A turtle's shell offers it no protection from the teeth of a large dog.

The pets themselves are also in danger from encounters with poisonous snakes and larger natural predators such as Bobcats and Coyotes looking for an easy meal.



The cat above is hunting songbirds. The coyote below is hunting your cat.



An African Spurred Tortoise released by its owner when it grew too large.



In the past few years it has become quite popular for people to take "alternative pets" into their homes. Iguanas, African Tortoises, Boas, and Pythons are all popular examples. Unfortunately, many of these species live longer and grow larger than their owners expected, and may be set free to fend on their own. Non-native animals should never be released into the wild. If you have an unwanted exotic pet, please contact one of many adoption organizations to find your pet a new home.

# Site Encroachment

It is not always possible to install boundary fencing on newly acquired preserve areas. In such cases there is a natural tendency for adjacent homeowners to allow their yards and belongings to slowly spill over and creep into the preserve sites.

Lawn grass especially can quickly spread across fire lanes and compromise their effectiveness as fire barriers, putting personal property at significant risk. We ask all adjacent homeowners to respect property lines and help maintain the unspoiled areas they live beside by not encroaching upon publicly owned preserve lands.



An excellent subsidized predator, raccoons are notorious for midnight garbage can raids.

# Subsidized Predators

Subsidized predation is a recently identified concern directly related to the increased population of humans adjacent to natural areas. In a normal ecosystem, the overall numbers of predators and prey keep each other in check. If the prey population booms the predator count soon increases to control it, and once the prey's numbers are reduced again the excess predators die off, maintaining the balance.

When humans are inserted into the equation, the result may be subsidized predation. In this situation, predator numbers stay high because there are many alternative food sources. Raccoons, for example, are notorious for upsetting garbage cans and gorging themselves on the contents. In some cases, people deliberately feed these animals, a practice that is now illegal in Florida.

Since predators such as raccoons, foxes, and feral housecats can eventually eliminate some native wildlife species from an area, please help keep their numbers under control. Do not feed wild animals, other than birds.



An erosion gully caused by illegal ATV traffic on the Upper Little Manatee River Corridor Preserve.

# Compatible Recreational Uses

While the public is encouraged to enjoy the preserve lands of the Tampa Bay Area, we should not forget that ultimately these lands are being acquired and managed to protect special ecosystems, and that recreational uses that cause degradation should not be allowed.

When considering a proposed activity, managers take into account many factors, including the suitability of a site for the activity as well as the anticipated impacts on habitat and wildlife populations. Residents living next to a site often get upset when told that they cannot use the area for their favorite activity, whether it be mountain biking or horseback riding. We can only ask that people consider the unique values that these lands represent, and hope that everyone will agree that protecting those resources for future generations is the highest priority.

# Essential Management Activities

When each preserve land is established a detailed site management plan is compiled that outlines strategies to improve and protect the site for years to come. That natural land you live next to is not being ignored or neglected, rather, it is constantly being monitored, enhanced, and protected in many ways, some of which are below:

## Fencing

While not every preserve site may have an adequate fence line when first purchased due to budgetary constraints, they are considered to be essential. Fences are the first line of defense in keeping unwanted activities out of a site, including dumping, vandalism, off-road vehicle use and other destructive activities. If you notice a damaged fence line please help by reporting it to site managers so that it may be repaired.



## Site Patrol

Site patrols allow managers to monitor the integrity of fence lines and fire lanes, conduct wildlife and plant life surveys and examine the progress of any restoration projects. If you see a vehicle, driving slowly through a site, make sure it is authorized, and if not, report it to the authorities.

## Exotic Plant Control

In this region, several dozen highly invasive non native plants have become established. Without constant vigilance and effective control efforts, even the most pristine natural areas will eventually become degraded by exotic plants.

## Prescribed Fire

Prescribed fires or "controlled burns" are a necessary management practice that not only maintains habitat for wildlife, but also reduces the risk of a wildfire. Burn Crews only operate when the weather conditions are perfect and take every precaution to ensure the safety of neighboring residences. Before a burn near a residential area can begin all available residents are given advance notice. Please support this essential activity.



## Restoration

Many sites purchased for preservation contain areas that have been degraded in the past. Often such areas are targeted for habitat restoration, to increase the overall environmental value of the land. Restoration projects offer an excellent opportunity to volunteer.

# Site Security

The parks and preserve lands of the Tampa Bay Area and beyond are created to protect a vital piece of original Florida from development and to allow Floridians to enjoy these unspoiled areas. We need your help in protecting these areas from trespassers. If you live next to a park or preserve, please take the time to get to know the agency and staff responsible for operating the site.

It is highly beneficial for land managers and adjacent residents alike when the public understands the rules, regulations and management objectives that apply to a specific area. Knowing who to contact and how to pass along information and concerns can prevent problems and resolve conflicts between neighbors and site managers. Access points, future development plans, permitted recreational uses and security issues are just a few of the subjects that need to be addressed by effective communication.



An example of illegal dumping in front of a preserve gate.