

Florida Homeowner's Journey to a Healthy Yard

I bought my home a little over five years ago. It's a garden condo unit, one of four units in one building, all single level. I have an end unit with a beautiful view of open green space with a few planted islands. When I bought it I thought having this bit of outdoor space to enjoy and care for would not be too overwhelming, better than owning a single family home. Little did I know invasive species were in my islands. I had taken a community course to learn about Florida native species and recognized that the asparagus fern growing along the outside of my courtyard fence was a Category I invasive plant. I remember my mother loving her asparagus fern. It was gorgeous. That's the problem with invasive trees/plants – many are exotic in appearance and attractive. Little did we know that these plants (and animals) would begin to crowd out our native species because they have no natural predators to keep them in check.

As a homeowner creating a healthy yard is one part of the planet where I can directly contribute. The asparagus fern was growing around my live oak tree and through the other side about to take over my front bed. The live oak was not looking too healthy and I had to have one of the trunks of the tree removed. I spent a total of 24 hours digging, digging, digging to remove every single bulb, root and leaf of this plant. These days I only find an occasional sprout trying to come up. My live oak tree is filling out and looking so much healthier. A healthy tree means a healthy place for native birds, insects and other critters to find shelter and food. I planted Fire Bush (native) and Fire Spike (non-native, non-invasive) both attract butterflies and hummingbirds to replace the fern.

And along the north side of my unit grew sword fern, also a Category I invasive species but it looked so beautiful growing around my cabbage palm and Palatka holly.



I was over spending hours getting rid of another invasive species. In the meantime I accepted a position as an environmental educator. I feel if you're going to teach it you must live it setting a positive example for students to follow. Being a positive example had to

start in my own backyard so out goes the sword fern. I hired a couple of neighborhood helpers and spent \$100 on labor and \$40 on herbicide. I look forward to planting Beautyberry shrubs, and other native plants that will help feed our native birds and attract butterflies around my trees.

I attended The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants' Plant Camp to learn more. After I returned from Plant Camp I found that I have four Chinese Tallow trees and one Brazilian Pepper tree in my yard.



Chinese Tallow



Brazilian Pepper

These two trees are Category I invasive trees and have been prohibited from being sold in Florida. Really, cut down trees? I love trees. I have spent so much time just battling about

the pros and cons of removing these trees. Both of these trees as well as the 1000 other invasive species are costing taxpayers millions of dollars. The most alarming are hydrilla and water hyacinths that are clogging our waterways, building resistance to herbicides with extremely fast growth rates. In my own yard I can do something about the trees.

My first request to our HOA to cut down the trees was not approved. I did not include information about the trees with my first request so now I'm putting together a second request with literature from the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council. You can find information on their website www.fleppc.org or <http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu> has a plethora of information to help you identify invasive species as well as steps to help you remove them. I've reported the existence of these invasive species on EDDMapS, a web-based mapping system for documenting invasive species distribution. If my second request is not approved I will contact the appropriate authorities to assist me. Three of the trees are too large to remove myself so I have gotten two estimates from licensed/insured tree contractors. One estimate is 50% less than the other so it is worth the effort to get more than one estimate. One thing to be aware of is that within minutes of the trees being chopped down an herbicide must be directly applied to the trunk. Full strength herbicides can be purchased in your home improvement store. If the herbicides are not applied these trees will grow back.

I have struggled with the removal of these trees/ferns. I've been called a tree hugger so how could I cut down a tree? I've seen how healthy my live oak tree has become after the removal of the asparagus fern. I've done my research and have been educated on this issue. I believe the removal of these invasive species will lead to a healthier yard for all the native trees, plants, birds, insects, and amphibians. I cherish our native species and want to preserve and promote their health.

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Chinese Tallow