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PRESS RELEASE  
ST LUCIE COUNTY INVASIVE PLANT MANAGEMENT SUCCESS STORY

Tropical Soda Apple (TSA) is an invasive plant unintentionally introduced into Florida in the 1980's and is now found in pasture and conservation areas throughout the state. Cattle and wild mammals feed on TSA fruit spreading seeds in shady hammocks as well as open pasture. Habitat invaded by TSA is less productive, wildlife corridors are blocked and species diversity is reduced. The Florida Cattleman's Association reported an estimated loss of \$6.5 - \$16 million annually due to the cost of chemical and mechanical control of TSA.

According to the St Lucie County Property Appraiser's Office, there are a total of 119,534 acres of land coded as "Grazing Land." Citrus and other AG uses are not included within this codification. TSA is ubiquitous on these St Lucie Co. grazing lands.

A new weapon against TSA has been transferred to the front line in the battle against TSA: *Gratiana boliviana*, the Tropical Soda Apple Beetle. This insect was found in South America, put through host specificity testing and approved by USDA for introduction to Florida. A new University of Florida study found that there was a 91% decrease in TSA density when TSA beetles are utilized as a biological control agent.

Saint Lucie County Extension Agents, Ken Gioeli and Sue Munyan, in conjunction with entomologists with the University of Florida Indian River Research and Education Center and the Florida Division of Plant Industries, conducted technology transfer of TSA beetles to cattle ranchers in St Lucie County. Site visits and educational presentations were conducted to teach ranchers about TSA beetles. In addition, a manual entitled "Biological Control of Tropical Soda Apple," Youtube videos and TAME Tropical Soda Apple internet portal were developed. Because of these efforts, 100% of the TSA found on St Lucie County's grazing lands have been impacted by TSA beetles.

Mike Thomas with Florida A&M University conducted a survey in 2006 and showed that central Florida ranchers spent an average of \$19/acre to control TSA on grazing lands. Since the TSA beetles are now resulting in a significant decrease in TSA density, it can be assumed that costs to control TSA have been reduced by a conservative 50% to approximately \$9.50/acre in St Lucie County. Funding is being sought by University Researchers Drs. Overholt and Thomas to conduct a second survey of ranchers to verify this cost reduction.

For additional information about Tropical Soda Apple, please contact the University of Florida / St Lucie County Cooperative Extension at (772) 462-1660.

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