

Unwelcome Guests

A look at how far ten years has taken us in controlling our pesky plants

by Janina Birtolo

Since our premier issue, *Times of the Islands* has spotlighted various plants that make Southwest Florida a botanical treasure. But, as every resident knows, living in these idyllic surroundings can sometimes bring unwelcome guests—and that's as true for plants as it is for people.

Charles Holmes, a Cape Coral resi-

berries are mildly poisonous, and its blooms can cause respiratory problems. It also grows like crazy.

"In subtropical and tropical areas, it spreads extremely rapidly," Holmes says, "and it's very extensive in wetland areas. In our area, we also have flocks of robins that come in the dead of winter and love to eat the berries. They help it spread."



Above left: Australian pines provide shade from the Florida sun, but their shallow root system proves fragile in strong winds. **Above right:** Although Brazilian pepper is fast growing and tough to get rid of, Sanibel is nearing its goal of total eradication.

dent, has been volunteering at the Conservancy of Naples for as long as *Times of the Islands* has been in existence. He's also a regular volunteer at Manatee Park in Lee County and at the Randell Research Center at the Caloosahatchee Heritage Trail on Pine Island. Holmes knows his plants—and he knows which ones are the most unwelcome of guests.

The worst of the "space invaders," Holmes says, is the Brazilian pepper. Introduced to Sanibel in the 1940s as an ornamental, it bears pretty red berries. But its good looks are deceiving. The

The only way to get rid of Brazilian pepper, Holmes adds, is by using Garlon, a very strong poison that requires a license to use. But homeowners can help control them from spreading by continually cutting down plants before they have a chance to bloom.

Evidence of the second offender is nearly ubiquitous along Interstate 75, where vast stands of melaleuca attest to this newcomer's love of growing conditions in South Florida. A native of Australia, it was brought here in the 1930s as a fast-growing shade tree that would also grow in and soak up water.

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