

Brazilian Pepper – Why it is so terrible!

Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolia*) is a species of flowering plant in the cashew family, Anacardiaceae, that is native to subtropical and tropical South America (southeastern Brazil, northern Argentina, and Paraguay). The family Anacardiaceae also contains poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac. Like many other species in the family Anacardiaceae, Brazilian pepper has an aromatic sap that can cause skin reactions (similar to poison ivy burns) in some sensitive people. Some people have also expressed respiratory problems associated with the bloom period of the pepper tree.

Brazilian pepper was brought into Florida in mid-1800s for use as an ornamental plant, before people were aware of the problems it would create. Its bright red berries and brilliant green foliage were used frequently as Christmas decoration as its berries ripen in late fall, and is sometimes known as “Florida holly”.



Brazilian pepper in bloom



Unripe fruit/berries and foliage

Distribution of Brazilian pepper tree throughout Florida is widespread, although limited to the warmer areas due to sensitivity to cold temperatures. It is one of the most aggressive of the invasive non-indigenous exotic pest plants in the State of Florida. There are over 700,000 acres in Florida infested with Brazilian pepper tree. It can be found as far north as Levy and St. Johns Counties, and as far west as Santa Rosa County. Many plant communities such as hammocks, pinelands and mangrove forests are often invaded and dominated by the Brazilian pepper tree. Its growth habit allows it to climb over understory trees and invade mature canopies, forming thickets that choke out most other plants.

Brazilian pepper invades aquatic as well as terrestrial habitats, greatly reducing the quality of native biotic communities by displacing food and reproductive habitat, and represents a significant threat to Florida’s native plant and wildlife populations. It is listed as a “Category I” invasive plant by the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council, as a result of its altering native plant communities by displacing native species, changing community structures or ecological functions.

Brazilian pepper is a sprawling shrub or small tree, with a shallow root system, reaching a height of 20–30+ feet. The branches can be upright, reclining, or nearly vine-like, all on the same plant. Its plastic morphology allows it to thrive in all kinds of ecosystems: from dunes to swamps, where it grows as a semiaquatic plant.

Brazilian pepper is hard to control because it produces basal shoots if the trunk is cut. Trees also produce abundant seeds that are dispersed mostly by birds and mammals. Flowering occurs from September through November and fruits are usually mature by December.

How You Can Help

The Friends of St. Sebastian River has in the past conducted volunteer work days at Dale Wimbrow and Donald MacDonald Parks to help control Brazilian pepper. Some of the volunteers in that work have also participated with the ongoing work the Marine Resources Council conducts throughout the Indian River Lagoon, to control the spread of Brazilian pepper.

We are once again working with the MRC, and also the Pelican Island Audubon Society, to help control the spread of the peppers and improve the habitat along the St. Sebastian River. And you can help us in several ways! Please remove peppers from your property and consider volunteering to help with the work throughout the River area. Even if you live along the River, you are allowed to treat and remove peppers on your property without a license or special training, but you are required to comply with all herbicide application instructions, including protection of surface and ground water. Herbicides should not be allowed to get into our waterways, and should not be applied when rain is expected. Please see the “Resources” below for more information on how to kill Brazilian peppers.

If you would like assistance with this work, you can contact any one of our organizations for more information. You can also help control the spread or regrowth of Brazilian peppers, by monitoring your yard and pulling up seedlings as they appear. They are quite easy to pull up in the first year of growth, and can be dug up as they start to get larger – it is important to remove all the roots of an untreated plant.

Before working with Brazilian peppers, please read the “caution” below!



Photo: Ann Murray, University of Florida/IFAS Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants

****Caution****

As mentioned earlier in the handout, Brazilian pepper is in a family of plants that is known to create allergic reactions/contact dermatitis in some people. If you do not know if you are allergic to these type of plants, be careful when first encountering Brazilian pepper. Reaction usually produces only a mild, to no reaction, in persons with a known allergy to other plants in this family.

As with other plants that produce allergic reactions, DO NOT BURN Brazilian pepper plant debris. Plants can be chipped and used as mulch (the wood is a nice red color), as long as the plants are harvested when they don't contain berries/seeds.

For information on treating allergic reactions to Brazilian pepper, visit: www.drbaileyskincare.com/blog/dermatologists-advice-for-treating-poison-oak-and-poison-ivy

References:

Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council - www.fleppc.org/list/list.htm

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) - <http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/invasive-plants/weed-alerts/brazilian-pepper>

University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants - <https://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/plant-directory/schinus-terebinthifolia>

Wikipedia - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schinus_terebinthifolius

Resources:

National Invasive Species Information Center - www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/plants/peppertree.shtml

Smithsonian Marine Station, Fort Pierce - www.sms.si.edu/irlspec/Schinus_terebinthifolius.htm

University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), Extension - <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/aa219>

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