

Showcasing Florida's Unique Wetlands

Removing exotic plant material to restore native plant communities.

BY MATT TAYLOR

At Royal Poinciana Golf Club (Naples, Florida), there once was a wetland infested with Brazilian pepper. No more. Now, the golf course showcases a large, thriving cypress stand to the east side of fairway 13 on our Pines Course. Big cypress fox squirrel and wood ducks make their home here, as do numerous other wildlife species. Golfers enjoy a new horizon as they play the hole. But that's how my story ends. Let me take you back to the beginning.

Brazilian pepper is one of the most aggressive and widespread of the non-indigenous plants thriving in wetland and upland habitats in Florida. This hearty tree, introduced from South America in the 1800s, spreads easily when fruit-eating birds, such as migrating robins and catbirds, eat the fruit and drop the seeds in their travels. Brazilian pepper covers hundreds of thousands of acres in south and central Florida, growing so densely that it physically and chemically prevents the growth of our native plants. It's made the state's Top Ten List of most unwanted plants for years now because of the damage it causes our native plant communities.

A Brazilian pepper hedge infested a 40,000-square-foot pine upland on the northern edge of Royal Poinciana's wetland. In addition, a 25-foot Java plum hedge planted along the property line some years ago also obscured the view of the wetland (Java plum is another exotic that invades and disrupts native plant communities). My thought was to open up a more aesthetically pleasing view from the fairway and



Brazilian pepper and java plum are aggressive non-indigenous plants that thrive in Florida wetland and upland habitats. At Royal Poinciana Golf Club they blocked views of a mature cypress wetland that represents native Southwest Florida.

create a corridor for more mammals and birds by getting rid of the exotic vegetation.

Realistically, I knew this was going to be a huge project. Change does not come easily to a club that has been around for 35 years, and the result of removing the exotics would be dramatic. This area had always been a large hedge of massive outcropped Brazilian pepper, and, once finished, it would be an open void for a few years until the new plant material grew in.

Over a period of two years, I showed the green committee chair and several club members what lay beyond the hedge. I literally walked through the

woods with them to explain what I had in mind. Their responses were encouraging, so I wrote articles about the project in our club newsletters to plant the seeds for change. I asked the opinions of other superintendents and colleagues within the industry. More positive responses gave me confidence that this was the right thing to do. I called an exotic removal company, obtained an estimate, and went to the board during the budget process. The project was approved.

Even up to the time when we began cutting trees, I continued to bring people out and let them know what was going to be done. This included the



A thorough communications campaign was followed by an extensive removal project of the exotics. The results were dramatic, and in a few short years this open void will showcase one of Southwest Florida's unique and valuable natural habitats.

golf professional, club manager, tennis professional, the green committee chairman, golf chairman, club president, landscape architects, golf course architects, and fellow superintendents. Communicating what was to be done, what it would look like, when it would be completed, what it would cost, and, equally important, *what was in it for the membership* was key.

GETTING THE JOB DONE

Because of the scope of the project, we selected a contractor to remove the exotic plant material. We waited to start until after our busiest golfing months due to the disruption we knew that the chainsaws and chippers would cause. The contractors began by removing the Java plum hedge and working their way down the edge of the wetland from the

wettest area into an area that would stay dryer longer.

My goal during the removal process was not to have the area look as if a bomb had gone off when we finished. We removed as much of the chippings as possible, even bringing in additional labor to rake up chippings when rain prevented us from getting dump trucks to the area. Once all the material was out, we started to re-vegetate some of the large areas. On the north side of the wetland, we planted live oak, cypress, and cord grass. We laid pine straw as natural-looking mulch to help control weeds. This area will not require much ongoing maintenance, just some occasional weed control, touch-up pine straw, and monitoring to ensure that the pepper hedge does not come back.

In all, we removed two acres of exotic plant material. Though the

horizon line of the hole has been dramatically altered, I have not heard any complaints. Golfers have gained a view of a mature cypress wetland that is representative of what Southwest Florida used to look like. The golf course now showcases, rather than obscures, one of Southwest Florida's most unique and valuable natural habitats.

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