

Green Gazette

Air Potato Patrol – The Secret Agents of the War on Air Potato

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Florida is home to many exotic invasive organisms - everything from plants to insects and even lizards and salt water fish. But one problem plant that many Florida residents are familiar with is *Dioscorea bulbifera*, or the air potato vine. In the past, herbicides and 'air potato roundups' were used to help slow its spread, but it seemed that the vines just came back stronger the next spring. In 2012, a leaf beetle native to SE Asia, *Lilioceris cheni*, was released for the first time in Florida as a biological control agent. The beetle began to have a positive impact on the volume of air potato plants in many areas. But many questions remain to be answered by researchers concerning the vine's growth and the distribution (and effects) the beetles are having across the state.

In order to better educate Florida residents about this invasive vine and how to control it, a citizen science project, The Air Potato Patrol, was created. This program was created by Dr. William Lester, UF/IFAS Extension in Hernando County, and Dr. Chris Kerr, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), and was launched in early June of this year. Their website includes several educational tutorials on how to properly identify the air potato vine, some common look-alike plants, and the biology and identification of the air potato leaf beetle.

If you are interested in getting involved and doing your part to help better control this invasive plant, along with helping the scientists working on it, the website address is <https://airpotatobeetle.com/>. Occasional surveys will be sent asking the members to collect data on the plants and beetles on their property. The response to date has been very positive, but we still need more volunteers to provide information about air potato on their property.

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