

DO I HAVE BRAZILIAN PEPPER ON MY PROPERTY AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?

If you are a long time resident or visitor to Sanibel, most likely you know about Brazilian pepper, while those with less history may not. If you are unfamiliar with the plant, here's what you need to know about this infamous plant.

Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolius*) is considered a Category I invasive plant by the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council, and is one of the most aggressive invasive exotic plants in Florida infesting over 700,000 acres. Its' dense canopy shades out other native species, and it invades the aquatic and terrestrial habitats of the wildlife that depend on the land and water for their survival.

In the 90's, a City appointed committee studied habitat issues in conjunction with the development of the Sanibel comprehensive surface water management system. The conclusion was that Sanibel's wetland habitat had decreased significantly since the 50's due to fire suppression, Brazilian pepper and other hardwood invasion, and a decreased wet season water table. Thus, in 1996, Sanibel City Council adopted The Brazilian Pepper Eradication Program with a goal to rid the entire island of this invasive exotic plant. Over the years, the Eradication Program, combined with new policies and systems to manage surface water as well as the prescribed burn program, has resulted in the near elimination of this invasive pest. However, it is an ongoing battle. If you are driving around Fort Myers in the winter, and you see beautiful red berries, it is probably Brazilian pepper. As you can imagine, those bright red berries are very attractive to birds and mammals who act as perfect dispersal agents. Thus, Brazilian pepper will continue to be an occasional nuisance. Be vigilant and prevent its spread.



Since plant identification can be challenging, here's what you should look for: Brazilian pepper is a shrub or small tree which can grow up to 40 feet. There are male and female plants, but only the female bears fruit. The leaves are alternately

arranged with 1-2 inch long, elliptic, and finely toothed leaflets. The serrated leaves are reminiscent of the wild rose leaves up north. The mid-rib of the leaf is reddish, and flower clusters which are white and 2-3 inches long, appear from September through November. The fruit is clustered and initially green, becoming bright red when ripe (usually by December). This timeframe distinguishes this non-native plant from native vegetation which generally blooms and bears fruit in the spring through fall. If you crush a leaf of the Brazilian pepper, it smells peppery or like turpentine, but be careful since it is a relative of the poison ivy family, and therefore, its sap can cause an allergic reaction.



In order to successfully control Brazilian pepper, all Brazilian pepper tree stumps MUST be treated with an appropriate herbicide. In most cases, a product containing the active ingredient triclopyr is the best choice for controlling Brazilian pepper; however, the methods of application may vary depending on the maturity of the pepper being treated. Mature trees should be cut as close to the ground as possible. Within 5 minutes, herbicide should be applied to the cambium (living tissue just inside the bark). Small seedlings or re-sprouts may be hand pulled or treated with foliar treatment. Brazilian pepper can be removed from developed property without a permit; however, a vegetation permit is required to remove pepper from a vacant parcel.

Brazilian pepper made its way to Florida from South America in the mid-1800s and is native to Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil. It was brought here as an ornamental plant, and its brilliant green foliage and bright red berries are often used in Christmas decorations. The introduction of Brazilian pepper to south Florida serves as another cautionary tale of why non-native plant and animal species can be so detrimental to the environment. In 1996, along with the Brazilian Pepper Eradication Program, City Council enacted legislation regulating seven other invasive exotic plant species – air potato, earleaf acacia, exotic inkberry, java plum, lead tree, mother-in-law's tongue, and Melaleuca. These eight are the worst of the invasive exotics on Sanibel, and may not be intentionally planted or transplanted on Sanibel. When applying for any City Development Permits, conditions of the permit require removal of these eight plants in perpetuity.

To view pictures of these plants or the City's "The Alien Invasion" brochure, visit the City's website at <http://www.mysanibel.com/Departments/Natural-Resources/Vegetation-Information/Exotic-Vegetation/Other-Invasive-Exotic-Vegetation> or contact the City's Natural Resources Department at 472-3700.