

SILENT INVADERS

Summer Plant Camp (for teachers only)

By Amy Richard, University of Florida/IFAS, Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants

When 29 science teachers return to their classrooms across Florida this autumn, they will have their own summer “camp” stories to tell. Many of the stories are sure to get their student’s attention. There will be tales of tromping through the woods in search of native and invasive plant species amidst ticks, spiders, and snakes hanging from trees. Even more stories are sure to be told about the aquatic plant field trip complete with floating classrooms (3 pontoon boats lashed together), hands-on plant collecting, water testing and some rather thrilling airboat rides. And then, with an assortment of show-n-tell materials, they’ll be demonstrating the cool lab activities they took part in: learning about leaf shapes, flower parts and a host of interesting and colorful aquatic-loving critters – including the instructors! Indeed, it was an experience they’ll be talking about for a while.

These adventures were all part of the first annual Silent Invaders Summer Plant Workshop, a four-day training session made possible by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection/Bureau of Invasive Plant Management (DEP/BIPM) and the University of Florida/IFAS Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants (CAIP). The goal was to grab the attention of teachers and inspire them to bring their new knowledge about native and invasive plants back to their classrooms.

The workshop was the year-end “finale” of the Florida Invasive Plant Education Initiative, now entering its third year. It also represents more than 15 years of fruitful partnership between the DEP/BIPM, (the late) Vic Ramey, and CAIP. Together, they have produced an impressive collection of educational materials and websites about Florida’s native, non-native and invasive plants



MENDY NORTON/BELLALAGO ACADEMY

Preparing for take off during their aquatic plant field trip on Rodman Reservoir (Lake Oklawaha), happy teachers smile for the camera.

and plant management. Inspired by Ramey’s original vision for the project, CAIP staff are now connecting with teachers in a much more concerted way; they introduced the issue and provided lots of background information on problems associated with invasive plants in Florida, and then invited teachers to actively collaborate in developing lessons and curricula.

“And that’s a good thing,” says Jeff Schardt of the DEP/BIPM. “Within the invasive plant management arena, everyone seems to agree: Now is the time to inform our younger population about the environmental and economic costs associated with invasive plant species. The realization has set in that no amount of herbicide, biological, mechanical, or human power can hope to control invasive plants if the state’s 17 million residents, homeowners and visitors continue to introduce invasive (or potentially invasive) plants into their backyards, or unknowingly dispose of them in natural areas.”



JOSHUA HUEY

Shown here is an assemblage of materials that were developed as part of the UF/IFAS CAIP education initiative. Items include: artificial aquatic plant kits for teachers to use in hands-on activities; Freshwater Plant Bingo; a “Magnify it!” lab activity (complete with hand lens) to facilitate learning about flower parts, leaf shapes, etc.; a freshwater plant jigsaw puzzle; plant ID flash cards and other identification tools, DVDs, PowerPoint™ lessons and lots of related curricula and activities. For a listing, visit: <http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/education/teachresfree.html>.

According to Schardt, the goal for this program is to raise awareness and ultimately change perceptions and behaviors related to the cultivation and stewardship of private and public lands well into the future. But it will take a commitment from educators to help us reach that next generation.

Amy Richard, CAIP's new Education Initiative Coordinator, says the Initiative is a work in progress and the source of lots of give and take with teachers. "Teachers aren't the only ones learning in these training sessions. We've also learned important lessons along the way. Thanks to their candid feedback, we've been able to find out what works for them in the classroom as well as what they need to effectively teach the material and still meet Florida's required state standards and benchmarks. By recruiting and including teachers in the development of the curricula, we'll all end up with better materials and something teachers can and will use."

"Through our interaction with teachers, we've also been reminded of the daunting task they face every single day as they try to capture the attention of their students and reconnect [or in some cases, introduce] them to the natural world. That's not an easy task in today's electronic media age."

This year's plans include taking the PowerPoint™ lessons that have already been developed and bringing them to a new level with animations and other visual and sound effects. However, without a doubt the real learning/teaching will be shepherded by



JEFF SCHARDT/DEP-BIPM

Teachers dig in to their aquatic plant treasures during the afternoon plant identification lab with Dr. David Hall. On the right: Wendy Norton (Bellalago Academy) and Diana Halsema (Creekside Middle School). On the left: Amy Johnson (Narcoossee Community School) and Ron Altice (Yearling Middle School).

this new group of specially trained teachers. With their leadership and enthusiasm, the message about invasive plant management is sure to spread. Spread like weeds!

Contact Amy Richard at arich@ufl.edu or 352/392-6843. Visit the website at: <http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/education>

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