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A Weed Born Pregnant

With the onset of warm weather, the cool season plants are dying back or are already gone. Homeowners are now getting a look at what is growing in the yard during the summer of 2012, and an exotic invader is likely one of the inhabitants.

Chamberbitter: It has the justified reputation of producing viable seeds ready to infest new territory from almost the moment it pops up from the soil. More than one frustrated landowner has been convinced the reviled exotic is born pregnant.

Phyllanthus urinaria, Chamberbitter's scientific name, is a native of tropical southeast Asia, but has adapted well life in the United States. The USDA's Plant Profile site indicates this pest has spread as far north as Illinois and Virginia, and west to Texas, and it is in Wakulla County, too.

All the southeastern states report significant plant populations. Initially it was considered an ornamental horticulture issue, but has become a real irritant for pasture managers.

Chamberbitter requires warm soil to germinate and prefers damp conditions. Once the plant is established, its highly efficient root system will handle drought conditions. It grows well in full sun, but will also flourish in spots receiving sun for limited hours daily.

Early detection is critical to control. The plants are in their most vulnerable condition with tender leaves and immature root systems, and (hopefully) the population is still small. Unfortunately, to the casual observer this annual blends effortlessly into the green background of warm season foliage.

If it is spotted early, its appearance frequently has this weed misidentified as a seedling mimosa, another undesirable exotic that was once considered an attractive ornamental flowering tree. Closer examination reveals an even more not-so-welcome revelation.

Though only three inches above the soil, multiple tiny fruit are already set under each branch with seed enclosed. The quantity of seed multiplies as Chamberbitter climbs towards its

two foot height potential adding seed laden branches as it grows. Seed production per plant quickly reaches into the hundreds.

The economic and environmental threat this plant portends is not as easily recognized as so many other well known noxious exotics. The ability to produce abundant seed in a variety of conditions is the key to its prolific territorial conquest and recognition as a known problem plant.

Distribution begins when seed eaters discover the plentiful supply, but fail to digest the meal or are just messy scattering the surplus bounty. Environmental factors, a stiff wind or a washing rain, can contribute to the dispersal.

Human interaction can be equally detrimental, if not worse, to maintaining control of this insidious invader. Too many times the initial reaction is to mow the affected area, but this action only aggravates the situation.

Mowing accelerates the seed distribution and potentially contaminates mowing equipment with lodged seed that can drop in non-contaminated areas. Additionally, the fibrous root system can quickly regenerate shoots with a whole new crop of viable seed shortly forthcoming.

Hand pulling is a possibility for small plots, but caution must be exercised. Never shake the soil from the roots as seed in the soil or on the plant may be returned to the site. Bagged up plants must be disposed of so their seed never have the opportunity to germinate.

Properly utilized herbicides can be effective, especially for larger plots. A pre-emergent herbicide can be helpful, depending on the situation, and prevent much of the seed production. The ideal application time is when the soil first begins to warm in the spring.

Once the plants have germinated, a selective post-emergent herbicide may be employed in some conditions. A non-selective herbicide may be needed in heavy Chamberbitter concentrations or where damage to adjacent plants is not a concern. All post-emergent herbicides have a better chance for success when the chamberbitter is young and actively growing.

Now is an excellent time to scout your property for signs of Chamberbitter, and if identified, to develop an action plan. Spring always arrives sooner than anticipated, and so do the pest.

Consult your Wakulla County Extension Office (850-926-3931 or <http://wakulla.ifas.ufl.edu/>) to get the latest recommendations on herbicides to control Chamberbitter and other eradication techniques.