

Java Plum: The Purple Invader

Introduced by the USDA in 1911 as an ornamental landscape plant with edible fruit, the Java Plum (*Syzygium cumini*) originated from Asia and India. It quickly adapted to Southwest Florida's warm tropical climate. This evergreen tree has smooth glossy opposite leaves with short, pointed tips. Its pinkish white flowers are clustered at the stem tips. Abundant dark purple fruit with lavender flesh is used for medicinal properties and a food source in some parts of the world. This tree quickly grows up to 80 feet and is long lived. Its dense foliage forms canopies that shade out young native plants and it produces a prolific number of seeds that are quickly dispersed by mammals and birds in Sanibel's environmentally sensitive areas. Seedlings develop quickly in natural areas. Falling plums litter and stain pavements, ferment rapidly, and create a foul odor. Java Plum is not considered salt tolerant, so hurricane Ian, tropical storm Debbie, hurricane Helene, and hurricane Milton curbed its growth and development for a few years.

Java Plum is listed as a category I invasive species by the Florida Exotic Pest Council (FLEPPC). A category I indicates that the plant is altering native plant communities by displacing native species, changing the plant community structure or ecological functions, or hybridizing with natives. The biodiversity of our island is negatively affected by invasive plants on our sanctuary island.

The best method to eradicate this tree is hand pulling seedlings. Mature trees should be cut to the ground and the stump immediately treated with Ortho MAX, Garlon, or similar products. This treatment may have to be repeated.

There are several Florida native trees that could easily replace a Java Plum in your yard: Strangler Fig, Live Oak, Mastic tree, or Gumbo Limbo. These native replacement trees provide a food source and cover for our wildlife.

Please remember that Java Plum is only one of the eight regulated invasive plants on Sanibel. The others include Mother-in-Tongue, Brazilian Pepper, Ear Leaf Acacia, Exotic Inkberry, Melaleuca, Lead Tree, and Air Potato. These eight species are not permitted to be grown, sold, or propagated on Sanibel, and upon the issuance of a City Development Permit, they are required to be removed from the parcel which must be maintained free of these plants in perpetuity. To view pictures of the Invasive Exotic Plants "Worst of the Worst" or the City's "The Alien Invasion" brochure, visit the City's website at <http://www.mysanibel.com/Departments/NaturalResources/Vegetation-Information/Exotic-Vegetation/Other-Invasive-Exotic-Vegetation> or contact the City's Natural Resources Department at 472-3700.