

# The Sanibel Island Restoration Partnership is Reclaiming Native Habitat from its Biggest Foe: Brazilian Pepper



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Brazilian pepper

## Not “Florida Holly”

It would be easy for Floridians to mistake Brazilian pepper trees as native vegetation. These ornamental shrubs were once fondly nicknamed “Florida holly,” when they were introduced into the State in the 1890’s — too early for most Floridians to recall they don’t belong. Now, they are prevalent from north central Florida throughout south Florida and claim more than 700,000 acres of the State’s landscape.

## Beautiful But Deadly

Brazilian pepper trees (*Schinus terebinthifolius*) have bright green compound leaves. Female trees show sprays of yellowish-white flowers in the spring yielding to clusters of small red berries in the fall. A multi-trunk shrub, the pepper can grow up to 40 feet tall. It can’t easily be destroyed by fire, flood, drought or chainsaw. The tree resprouts even after it is cut down. In addition, birds and animals easily spread its seeds. Worse still, the tree is related to poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac, and contact with any part of it can cause skin irritation.



Erick Lindblad SCCF

After restoration

Floridians spend millions of dollars in taxes trying to eradicate the pepper tree because its dense thickets suppress and destroy natural vegetation and consequently the native wildlife that depends on it. The tree’s shallow roots allow soil erosion. Brazilian peppers near water are especially deadly because they destroy valuable wetland habitat and/or alter shorelines by destroying fish-breeding habitat.

## The Sanibel Island Restoration Management Partnership Offers Solutions

Invasive plant removal on the J.N. “Ding” Darling refuge began in 1976. In the early 1980s the City of Sanibel and the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation also were removing the Brazilian pepper. It wasn’t until 1998 that the three entities joined hands, along with contractor Ferrier Enterprises, to formally create the partnership. Their ongoing team effort is restoring or enhancing hundreds of acres of native wetland habitat for marsh birds, raptors, wading birds, American alligators, and small rodents, and endangered and threatened species, such as eastern indigo snakes, brown pelicans, and wood storks. Through the work of the Partnership and others, more than half of the island (about 70 percent) is now protected as wildlife conservation land.



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Before restoration



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Roseate spoonbill

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American alligator

Development, drainage, and exotic plant invasions were destroying Sanibel's delicate ecosystem and wildlife populations once common to the island, such as roseate spoonbills and blue herons, were beginning to decline. In response, the partnership took on the island's biggest challenge — destroying Brazilian pepper.

**How the Partnership is Meeting the Challenge — Shared Efforts, Shared Funds:**

- For natural resource management, the City of Sanibel, the Conservation Foundation, and the Refuge agreed to share the cost of a D-4 Caterpillar dozier and an equipment operator position.
- To help control Brazilian pepper, the City of Sanibel was divided into six zones. Residents were offered free, periodic roadside pick-ups of pepper debris and the use of a free exotic plant disposal site. Local contractors were able to bid jobs knowing that use of the disposal site was free, and these savings benefited the landowners. So far, 2,100 of 4,800 acres within the city and the refuge have been cleared of this pesky invader.
- An experimental impoundment was created to test the effect of higher water levels on the pepper tree. This successful experiment led to a surface water management project that raised maximum water levels in the freshwater interior wetland from 2.5 feet to 3.2 feet, a technique that also helps control flooding.
- The Partnership cleared the 400-acre Sanibel Botanical site of Brazilian pepper.

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Clearing Australian pine and Brazilian pepper on Sanibel Island in 2001

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Partners clearing invasive plants in 2001

