

Our Bahamas, Our Native Plants

Have you ever heard of Gumbo Limbo, Horseflesh or Strong Back? What about Gale of Wind, Goat's Foot or Sea Oxeye? These are some of the many native plants found in The Bahamas.



Gumbo Limbo/ Gum Elemi

Native plants grow naturally in our pine and coppice forests, wetlands and on beaches. These are the plants that Christopher Columbus saw, when he first arrived here in 1492. Native plants are adapted to survive in our environment – they do not need a lot of water or fertilizers to grow and survive. Some examples include Caribbean pine, black mangrove, dildo cactus, mahogany, sea grape, gum elemi and lignum vitae - our national tree.

Can you think of other native plants?

Native plants are very important for maintaining healthy ecosystems in The Bahamas. They provide food and shelter for birds and other animals. For example, red mangroves are important wetland plants that act as a nursery for many kinds of animals such as conch, grouper, sharks and wetland birds. Native coastal plants such as sea oats, bay cedar and sea grapes help prevent erosion of beaches. Our



beaches are home to a variety of burrowing animals such as crabs, and are also where sea turtles lay their eggs. Poisonwood sap that will irritate human skin, is important to white crown pigeons, which use the berries to make 'pigeon milk' to feed their chicks. Native plants are also important to our culture – as bush medicine and food, and to our economy – for our straw craft and boat-building industries.



Sea Oats



NATIVE PLANTS



Mahogany



Lignum Vitae



Coco Plum



Thatch Palm

But not every plant that you see in 'da bush' or in your yard is a native plant. Some plants were brought to The Bahamas from other countries for food, landscaping or other uses. Even though they may thrive here, they are considered **non-native**. Many of them need special care, such as regular watering and fertilization. Some examples of non-native plants include aloe vera, cerasse, fever grass, banana, mango, coconut, and a number of other fruits that we love to eat, hibiscus, bougainvillea, poinciana, silk cotton, and our national flower – the Yellow Elder.



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While non-native plants may benefit us in some ways, some of them can be harmful. **Invasive** plants are non-native plants that cause harm to ecosystems, the economy or human health. They grow quickly, spread rapidly and are usually the first to grow when



Casuarinas grow quickly on cleared land

native trees are cut down for roads or construction. Today, invasive plants are found all over The Bahamas, especially along our coasts. The *Casuarina* (Australian pine) competes with our native plants for resources such as space, light and water. *Casuarina* thickets can take over an area, as their needles prevent native plants from growing nearby. Their shallow roots also promote beach erosion. Brazilian pepper is another invasive plant.

Its sap can cause skin irritation in humans. Other invasive species of most concern are *Scaevola* (Hawaiian sea grape), *Melaleuca* (paper bark tree) and *Wedelia* (carpet daisy).



Brazilian Pepper



Scaevola



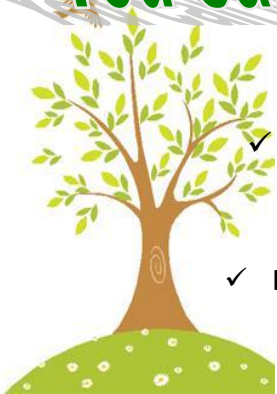
Melaleuca



Wedelia

Invasive species are not the only threats to our native plants. Clear-cutting land for development also results in the loss of native plant biodiversity. Pollution and frequent fires can also harm native plants and animals in an ecosystem.

You can help to conserve native plants



- ✓ Learn to identify native plants and why they are important.
- ✓ Tell others why we should protect our native plants.
- ✓ Do not clear-cut land where natural forest areas occur. Leave as many trees as possible, and include them in your landscape design.
- ✓ Choose native plants to put in your garden or to landscape your property.
- ✓ Do not put invasive plants in your garden or use them to landscape your property.
 - ✓ Support invasive plant removal activities in your community
 - ✓ Properly dispose of your trash, waste chemicals or other pollutants.

So the next time you are in 'da bush' hiking, picking coco plum, or crabbing, look around and remember that the plants you see are not just bush but are an important part of the natural biodiversity, culture and economy of The Bahamas.