Friday’s Feature
By
Theresa Friday
July 26, 2009

Nandian: naughty or nice?

*Nandina domestica,* also known as heavenly bamboo, is a tough, bread-and-butter evergreen shrub. Nandina is an extremely popular shrub and is frequently used to hide or camouflage unsightly outdoor items or structures. While the common name may make you think it’s a type of bamboo, it is not.

It is, however, an invasive species along the Gulf Coast and is actively disrupting native plant communities. In addition to Florida, it has escaped cultivation in eight other states.

Many invasive species were originally introduced as ornamental plants, including nandina. It was first established in the United States in 1804 and has been used extensively for its attractive and dependable foliage, flowers and berries.

The abundant red berries are eaten by birds and other animals. Where the berries are excreted, nandina sprouts, sometimes many miles away from where it originated. It also spreads via underground stems, popping up to form dense thickets.
The first step in preventing the spread of this invasive species is to limit planting and to remove exist plants within the landscape. If possible, removal should occur before seeds are produced. Berries contain two seeds and remain on the plant for several months so care must be exercised to prevent seed dispersal during the removal process.

If you can’t, or won’t, remove the plant, remove the flowers in spring or the developing berries in early summer to prevent the spread of this invasive plant. To control the underground spread, handpull smaller sprouts being careful to remove all fragments of root to prevent reinestation.

Nandina can be aggressive in the landscape and difficult to remove, so think carefully before planting it. If you really want to use nandina in the landscape, look for proven sterile cultivars that are either berry-free or produce berries that don’t germinate.

More than 40 cultivars of nandina exist but little information is available on the potential invasiveness of its cultivars. However, University of Florida research in north and south Florida has shown that ‘Firepower’ nandina does not flower or fruit.

'Firepower' nandina grows to be 24 to 60 inches tall and is considered a medium-size cultivar. Often it is marketed as "dwarf" because it is distinctly shorter than the standard species type and is slower growing. Annual plant growth of 'Firepower' nandina is 4 to 6 inches. Typical mature specimens of 'Firepower' nandina are 24 inches tall and wide.
New leaf growth is a chartreuse color, and becomes tinged with red during the growing season. The real show stopper is its stunning rich crimson fall and winter coloring. For more information on ‘Firepower’ nandina, view the University of Florida online publication at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP381.

Successful establishment of nandinas in the landscape often depends on planting techniques and care. They prefer to be placed in a shrub bed that is well-drained to moist, loose, and rich in nutrients and humus. Cover with a layer of mulch to prevent loss of moisture, deter weeds and moderate summer temperatures.

If you have existing non-sterile nandinas in the landscape, be responsible and ensure that you don’t allow its spread by removing the flower or berries. If you want to add this tough, easy-to-grow plant to your landscape, be sure to choose a cultivar that is known to be noninvasive.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

For additional information on County Extension Services and other articles of interest go to http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu.

###