

*By: Shonda Borden, Environmental Extension Assistant
Alabama Sea Grant/Auburn Marine Center*

The weekend preparing and planting the flowerbed in front of the house was almost perfect. The sun was out, the breeze was blowing, and the weather was truly gorgeous. Unfortunately, the fire ants in my yard thought so too, and my feet are now itching from not-so-little red bites from those voracious, temperamental, saber-toothed insects. Ok, maybe not really saber-toothed, but they sure feel like it.

Fire ants are an invasive species that are native to Brazil. We here in South Alabama have the dubious honor of being the first in the United States to host these unwelcome visitors. They were discovered here shortly after the end of the First World War, and probably hitchhiked into the state with cargo or soil that was used as plant shipments. Since then they've made themselves at home, and infested more than 260 million acres in the southeast from Oklahoma to North Carolina. Like many invasive species, fire ants have few natural enemies here, and that combined with their ability to lay up to 200 eggs a day makes them difficult to eradicate.

Fire ants are just one example of an invasive species. Other common examples include zebra mussels, hydrilla, nutria and Australian jellyfish. Calling a species "invasive" means that their introduction to the new area has caused environmental or economic impact. These species are usually introduced into a new area unintentionally through ballast water dumping, hitchhiking on boat hulls, escape or release of fishing bait, aquaculture or aquarium species, and the plant trade.

You might not think that invasive species could cause so much trouble, but they are considered to be one of the largest threats to our terrestrial, coastal and freshwater ecosystems, and the problem extends globally. Once an invasive species gets a foothold in an area, they can

quickly overrun our native species because the invasives often reproduce quickly, are of sturdy stock, and rarely have predators. This is one reason invasive species are the second leading cause of species extinction, habitat destruction being the first.

Invasive species hurt our pocketbooks as well, through the cost of efforts to manage and control them. How much do you spend on fire ant or weed control at your house? Now multiply that to a national scale with thousands of plant and animal species, and you'll see how it easily gets into the billions of dollars spent protecting the land and water habitats that support us. It is far cheaper to prevent species like this from establishing themselves than it is to try to get rid of them once they're already established.

Back to those pesky ants. Your local extension office has some great information on the best way to control fire ants. You can search their publications on their website at <http://www.aces.edu/pubs>, or give them a call. I'm gearing up for my fire ant war this weekend, so wish me luck. As always, feel free to contact me as well at the Auburn Marine Extension and Research Center at (251) 438-5690, or by email at bordesm@auburn.edu.