
The Palmetto

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The Plant from Hell

by Nancy C. Coile

The earliest record in Florida of tropical soda apple (*Solanum viarum* Dunal), another pest plant, is from Glades County in 1988. David Hall (KBN Engineering) believes that *Solanum viarum* may have been in Florida since 1981 or 1982, but in the short time since its arrival it may have infested over 150,000 acres. It has become the dominant vegetation in vast areas of the pastures in Glades, Hendry, and Highlands counties.

Soda apple is native to Argentina and Brazil. The plant is prickly, as are many other *Solanum* spp. Its appellation - the plant from hell - refers to its presence near Devils Garden in Hendry County, or perhaps to the similarity of its common name, soda apple, to its name "Sodom apple" in British-speaking areas (Sodom is the biblical city noted for its wickedness).

Solanum viarum is an herbaceous perennial that may reach six feet (2 m) in height. The stems have hooked prickles, while the leaf blades and petioles have 3/4-inch (2 cm) long, rigid prickles. The flowers are white in terminal clusters. Immature fruits are pale green with dark green veining, looking like a small striped watermelon. Mature fruits are yellowish, leathery-skinned, and about 1½ inches (4 cm) across. Seeds are numerous, flat, bitter, and mucilaginous.



The Florida Department of Agriculture has issued a notice that this plant will be listed as a noxious weed, because it displaces native plants as well as forage plants, which will make it illegal to buy, sell, or move the plant.

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