

# LARA COLLEY

CONSERVATIONIST  
ENVIRONMENTALIST  
EDUCATOR

By: MaryJo Peters

Lara Colley is the Education Coordinator for the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Florida Invasive Species Education Initiative (UF/IFAS IPEI). She also develops, evaluates and implements education outreach materials and programs for the UF/IFAS Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants (CAIP). Colley is a fifth generation Floridian who grew up spending time in the woods.

Outdoor activities led her to her passion for the environment and wanting to protect it, while helping others appreciate what she does as well. She decided to get a bachelor's degree from UF in natural resource conservation.

Following her bachelor's degree, she studied under Dr. Martha Monroe to earn her master's degree studying forest resources and conservation. She also completed a certificate in

environmental education. Once school was finished, she became a park ranger at Sweetwater Wetlands Park, which led her to the position she has now with UF/IFAS IPEI.

Colley creates outreach material and educates the public about why invasive plants present challenges to Florida. She helps PK-12 teachers learn about invasive and aquatic plants, so they may pass the knowledge on to their students. Another youth group she is involved with educating is Florida 4-H.

Colley defines native plants as ones that have evolved here. She describes them as have always been here, which has allowed the plants to adapt with the controls in place to allow balance in the ecosystem.

"Invasiveness is defined by a plant that is introduced to a new location, grows aggressively, and is resilient. It has multiple modes of reproduction and basically crowds

out native plants," said Colley.

Brazilian Peppers are a great example of an invasive plant that has taken over 700,000 acres in Florida. They have no predator and nothing to prevent it from growing.

"Invasive plants tend to be beautiful plants, so it can be challenging for people to understand why in the world we would be against plants that are beautiful" Colley explained.

Want to learn more about invasives or CAIP? Email Colley at [laracolley@ufl.edu](mailto:laracolley@ufl.edu) to set up a time to speak with her.

