

# The Melaleuca Menace

## *What is melaleuca?*

Melaleuca (scientific name: *Melaleuca quinquenervia*), also known as punk tree, paperbark tree, or cajeput, is an invasive, exotic nuisance plant in South Florida. First brought to Florida from Australia around 1900, melaleuca (MEL-ah-LUKE-ah) found widespread use as an ornamental tree and as a soil stabilizer on levees and spoil islands. It was even used in early attempts to dry up the Everglades.



## *Why is melaleuca bad?*

1. **Invasive to wetlands** - Melaleuca invades treeless sawgrass marshes and other plant communities, outcompeting native vegetation. No native animals are known to feed on it, and it gradually forms an ecological wasteland where little exists but melaleuca trees. The habitat degradation resulting from invading melaleuca affects wildlife such as migrating birds traveling through Florida. Natural vegetation is crucial to them, as it provides the fruits, seeds, and insects needed to fuel their journey. Melaleuca forests may look natural, but their quality as habitat is not much better than a parking lot.
2. **Wind damage** - Because melaleuca trees are fragile and have shallow roots they are potential hazards during windstorms.
3. **Fire** - Due to the high levels of oils in its leaves, melaleuca trees burn extremely hot and its fires are difficult to extinguish. Melaleuca trees are fire-adapted: not only does fire often not kill them, but fire also promotes their spread by inducing the release of seeds and creating ideal soil conditions for seedling establishment.
4. **Invasive to pastures** - Melaleuca grows in upland habitats as well as it does in wetlands, and because nothing grazes its leaves, it can become quite a weed in pastures. Ranchers must keep their pastures mowed to suppress melaleuca seedlings.
5. **Harbors other pests** - Melaleuca harbors lobate lac scale. This tiny insect, first found in Florida in 1999 and native to India, attacks over 200 species of trees and shrubs in Florida. The effects of this insect are potentially devastating to many ornamental and fruit-producing trees and to natural communities. Melaleuca trees can act as a reservoir for this insect, allowing the scale to infest surrounding trees.

## *Why use melaleuca mulch?*

Commercial melaleuca mulch, which has been composted for 90 days before bagging in order to kill the seeds, is some of the most environmentally-friendly and termite-resistant mulch on the market. But producers are having a difficult time convincing consumers to buy it because it is not the mulch they have become accustomed to using. The majority of retail mulch comes from cypress; unfortunately, thousands of cypress trees are cut annually solely for use in residential and commercial landscapes. Having a market for melaleuca products would provide another incentive for melaleuca removal from natural lands.

## *Does melaleuca cause allergies?*

Melaleuca flowers throughout the year and some people have positive allergic reactions to its pollen in clinical allergy tests. But melaleuca is pollinated by bees, not wind; therefore its pollen is not readily airborne. So it is unclear how much exposure would be required to produce an allergic reaction outside a clinical laboratory. There may be additional volatile compounds released by the flowers, which may function as allergens. Skin exposure to oils in melaleuca bark or leaves may result in rashes or itching.