

The Iguana Invasion – monsters on the move

A few months ago we featured an article called Iguanas in the Landscape. The many letters and calls we received from readers besieged by the problem have motivated us to take another look at what is now referred to as “**The Iguana Invasion.**”

Green iguanas are not native to the United States. This places wild green iguanas in the category of “invasive” or “exotic” species - non-native species that have been introduced into a new habitat and which often cause damage to the ecosystem. Think of the invasion as a 4 - point attack – Foraging, Digging, Excrement, and Expansion.

According to the **University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UFIFAS)** green iguanas in Florida feed on shrubs, trees, landscape plants, orchids, and fruits such as figs, mangos, berries and tomatoes. One large iguana taking up residence in a yard can decimate ornamental vegetation. If you are a gardener, there is nothing quite like waiting all year for your orchid to bloom and have it disappearing overnight as some iguana’s appetizer. There is no effective repellent that will prevent them from devouring an entire hibiscus or rose bush in a day. Neem oil worked for a while. Garlic guard has worked for some but for other iguanas it just gave an Italian flavor to their meal. You’re left with planting things they won’t eat...**yet.** Currently, you can safely have gardens filled with milkweed, rosemary, oleander, croton and citrus.

In addition to destroying your landscaping efforts, several residents have written about iguanas digging nesting burrows that can undermine foundations, sidewalks, and sea walls. Because iguanas often prefer to defecate in or around water, it is not uncommon for an iguana to use a private pool as a defecation area. “We seem to be overrun with them”, wrote Wilton Manors resident, Carol Wise. “They are ruining my dock and landscape. My dog has started to attack them, shake them to death and then bring them in his doggy door as a surprise for mommy. Have you any safe and sure way to get rid of these guys”, she asked. We asked her to lend us her dog. Then, warned her to tell her dog that the odiferous iguana feces may harbor *Salmonella* bacteria.

Large adults may be aggressive towards people and pets if they feel threatened. “This is like Jurassic Park, only the dinosaurs are smaller”, said Dane Hancock, who lives in the Las Olas Isles. His observation mirrors that of many other residents who reside on waterfront property in Broward County. The spike in the population of the iguana is due to its reproductive propensity and the lack of predators. One male can court several females who can each produce up to 50 eggs in each hatch and they are mating like mad! Predators like raccoons, fish crows, vultures, feral pigs, snakes, hawks, owls, and egrets might diet on the eggs or young hatchlings. Yet, many of these are not found in the heart of a city. In their native environment, large predators like ocelots, pumas, jaguars, anacondas, boa constrictors and people eat adult iguanas. We haven’t seen any pumas roaming in our yard, which means the only significant large predator we have to help curb the population is human.

Denise Fox, a nine-year resident of the Tarpon River neighborhood, appealed for help to elected officials at a recent Fort Lauderdale City Commission meeting prompting the city to send a letter to the county and state asking for enforcement. “One or two in the backyard nine years ago seems kind of fun,” she said. “Now we’ve got 40 or 50 of them.” Mayor Jim Naugle told her that animal control, which includes iguanas, is Broward County’s bailiwick. “I don’t know what the city itself could do,” he said, “Have an iguana patrol or iguana officers?” He told her it’s up to individual property owners to take care of the problem. Fox said she is continually referred to trappers, who charge \$25 to \$50 to capture one iguana.

So much for expecting more support in this crusade. What about creating laws that control importation of exotic species? How about requiring iguana owners to spay or neuter their pets so that if they do get loose, they won’t contribute to the feral iguana population? What about funding research for sterilization procedures to curb the population?

We already have some laws* in the books that deal with iguanas mostly to protect them. Iguanas are considered exotic unprotected wildlife, so they can be captured and removed from private property at any time without special permits. However, anticruelty laws apply; only live traps and snares are legal in the State of Florida. In addition, it is illegal to release iguanas in Florida** so you will have to find a willing pet dealer to take them. After capturing 20 iguanas off of our dock, our local pet dealer no longer wishes to see us.

How about fining those who FEED them? Feeding them only encourages them to stay around, so don’t do it. Iguanas are getting so prolific that if you go to any waterfront restaurant, you are certain to see them waiting for morsels of your meal. If we cannot get support from the state, maybe it’s time to put them on OUR menu.

Also known as “Caribbean Chicken”, “the meat of adult iguana and the eggs are eaten and considered a delicacy throughout their native range. In Bonaire the sick and the elderly are encouraged to eat “Yuana Stobá” (Iguana Stew) which is said to have health benefits. It is also believed that if a man eats it, he will have “hopi forsa” (much strength) and it is also rumored to be a cure for impotence. Now, that should get some attention. Here is one of the many recipes you can find on the Internet.

Bon Appétit.

Iguana Stew:

It's going to be difficult to find iguana at your local supermarket, so you might substitute fresh tuna or chicken for the reptilian meat. Since the spices and other ingredients are the same as used in Curacao, you will have rough approximation of the dish. Note: As this recipe cooks, you might have to adjust the consistency with more water or coconut milk.

2 pounds iguana meat, or substitute tuna or chicken, in large chunks

Juice of 1 lime

3 cups water

1 cup coconut milk

10 small potatoes, diced

3 tomatoes, chopped

3 bell peppers, cut into 1-inch pieces

1 cup noodles, such as macaroni

2 bay leaves

½ teaspoon oregano

1 sprig parsley

1 sprig thyme

3 stalks celery, cut into ½ inch pieces

2 habanero chilies, seeds and stems removed, chopped

3 cloves garlic, chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

1 ounce whiskey of choice

In a bowl, toss the meat with the lime juice. Cover and while the meat is marinating, combine all the remaining ingredients, except the whiskey, in a large pot or stock pot, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat, cover, and cook over low heat for 45 minutes.

Add the marinated meat, adjust the consistency if necessary, cover and cook over low heat for the following times: iguana, 1 hour; tuna, 20 minutes; chicken, 40 minutes.

Just before serving, add the shot of whiskey and stir well.

Yield: 4 to six servings

Heat Scale: Hot according to **Extremefood.com**

**39-4.005 Florida Administrative Code

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