Dealing with Iguanas in the Southwest Florida Landscape

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Background

- The **green iguana** or **common iguana** (*Iguana iguana*) is a large, arboreal herbivorous species of lizard of the genus *Iguana* native to Central and South America.

- The green iguana ranges over a large geographic area, from southern Brazil and Paraguay to as far north as Mexico and the Caribbean Islands.
Background

• Long known as the "chickens of the trees," green iguanas have been eaten both as a delicacy and a staple food for at least 7,000 years.

• Recent studies and efforts to grow the iguana as a food staple are encouraging. "With consumers willing to pay more for the meat than fish, poultry, pork or beef, iguana farming can provide an economic incentive to 'grow' lizards and not to fell forests to create more space for growing crops or cattle."
Background

- Local farmers, who once hunted the iguana, are now learning how to raise them for food and for income generation in the production of leather handicrafts.
- Fat and eggs are also used for medicinal purposes.
Iguanas in the United States

• First reported in Miami in 1964. At some point, they were spotted in the Keys.
• In the '80s and '90s, iguanas became popular pets, but many people couldn't deal with those that grew bigger than their family dog.
• Now common in waterfront subdivisions in Broward and Palm Beach counties.
Iguanas in the United States

• Three large members of the iguana family are common – the green iguana (Iguana iguana), the Mexican spiny-tailed iguana (Ctenosaura pectinata) and the black spiny-tailed iguana (Ctenosaura similis).
Iguanas in the United States

Adult green iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) with male on the left.
Iguanas in the United States

Juvenile green iguana.
This hatchling is an attractive size for a pet or to sell to a pet store.
Iguanas in the United States

Adult male black spiny-tailed iguana (*Ctenosaura similis*).
Iguanas in the United States

Female black spiny-tailed iguana (*Ctenosaura similis*).
Iguanas in the United States

Adult female (top) and male (bottom) Mexican spiny-tailed iguana (*Ctenosaura pectinata*).
Habits and Behavior

• Adult iguanas are large, powerful animals that can bite, cause severe scratch wounds with their extremely sharp claws and deliver a painful slap with their tail.

• They usually avoid people, but will defend themselves against people and pets who try to catch or corner them.”
Habits and Behavior

• Wild adult iguanas can be dangerous, never tame sufficiently and rarely make acceptable pets.

• Iguanas eat valuable landscape plants, shrubs and trees as well as orchids and many other flowers.

• They do not eat citrus, but they like fruit such as berries, figs, mangoes, tomatoes, bananas and lychees.
Habits and Behavior

- Iguanas also dig burrows that undermine foundations and sidewalks.
- Iguana burrows next to seawalls cause erosion and eventual collapse of the walls.
- Droppings from iguanas litter areas and may be a source of salmonella bacteria, which causes food poisoning.
Habits and Behavior

- Mike Maunder, director of Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables, said hundreds of iguanas in its garden are a major problem because they feed on important plant collections.
Habits and Behavior

• “Iguanas will climb trees to feed, and young specimen trees have been badly damaged and in some cases killed,” he said. “Our historic hibiscus garden was grazed to the ground and has been moved to possibly a safer location.

• The impact of these herbivorous animals in a botanic garden cannot be sustained – five large iguanas eat as much as one sheep!”
Eating Bougainvillea Leaves
Exotic and Invasive

• Because they are not native to Florida, they are not protected in the state – except by anti-cruelty laws.
• Green iguanas are listed by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) because of their economic importance and over-harvest for the pet trade.
• In Florida, all captured iguanas must be kept in captivity as pets or captive breeding stock, or must be destroyed. They cannot be released into the wild.
Exotic and Invasive

• Iguanas, which are considered exotic unprotected wildlife, can be captured and removed by property owners from their own property at any time without special state or federal permits.

• Some counties or municipalities may have passed statutes that protect these invasive exotics, so check with local authorities before removing iguanas.
Effect of Environmental

- When the temperature falls below about 60 F they become less able to move around.
- At temperatures below about 40 F they become completely immobile and begin to suffer serious stress.
Control of Iguanas

Tolerance

• Many people enjoy sharing their living space with a few iguanas. Learn to appreciate these exotic creatures.

• Do not feed iguanas in your yard. This will attract more iguanas and can create problems for both you and your neighbors by creating unnatural concentrations.

• Do not become a nuisance to your neighbors by feeding iguanas. Pans of cut fruit will attract rats and raccoons as well as iguanas.

• Be a considerate neighbor and good environmental steward.
Acts of ‘kindness’ Can Have Devastating Results
Control of Iguanas

Exclusion

• Protect valuable plants with cages or screen enclosures. There are currently no repellents registered for preventing feeding damage from iguanas.
Control of Iguanas

Habitat Modification

• Remove protective cover such as dense thickets and piles of landscape timbers or rocks. Sheet metal guards of trees, palms, and dock pilings will prevent them from climbing.

• Fill vacant burrows with concrete and sand during the day when the animals are likely to be away from the burrow.

• Electric fences on seawalls and docks may deter or stop iguanas from climbing up on to them.

• Persistent harassment will also encourage iguanas to move to safer pastures.
Control of Iguanas

Habitat Modification

- Avoid planting species that are preferred food for iguanas
  - Hibiscus, including rosellia, Orchids, Impatiens, Roses
  - Garden greens - Kale, broccoli, mustard, collards, sorrel, beets, lettuces
  - Squashes and melons
  - Most fruits and flowers
  - Hong Kong Orchid Tree
Control of Iguanas

Natural Enemies

• Animals, including cats and dogs kill the majority of hatchling and juvenile iguanas.
• After young iguanas reach about two feet in length, they have fewer natural enemies.
• Automobiles and people are the main cause of mortality of adult iguanas.
• Freezes keeps iguanas limited to the southern half of peninsular Florida.
Control of Iguanas

Capture and Removal

- Iguanas can be captured and removed from private property at any time without special permits.
- They may be caught by hand, noose pole, net, or traps. Only live traps and snares are legal in the State of Florida.
- Babies can be caught by hand or with a thread or monofilament noose on a long bamboo pole.
- These can be sold or given to pet stores or exotic pet wholesalers.
Control of Iguanas

Capture and Removal

- Iguanas and many lizards hold their heads up, to better watch for predators, as they walk or run. This behavior makes them ideal candidates for snares.
- The 24-inch locking snares normally sold for trapping muskrats, mink, or rabbits are large enough for any iguana.
- Set snares at burrow entrances, holes under fences, along seawalls, or any place that iguanas regularly congregate or move.
Control of Iguanas

Shooting

• It is not legal or safe to discharge firearms (or pellet rifles) in suburban environments of South Florida where iguanas are commonly causing problems. Shooting is not recommended.

• Using a bow with tethered fishing arrows may be legal, but the humaneness is debatable. Check with local Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission officers or local law enforcement before using any projectile weapon.

• Slingshots with small pebbles or palm fruits may be a useful harassment tool, but should only be used under adult supervision and when you are very sure of your backstop.
Control of Iguanas

Eating

• The meat of adult iguanas and the eggs are eaten and considered a delicacy throughout their native range, especially during Easter week. As of 2004, the price of iguana meat was $14.00 / pound in Maryland.

• Large adults, too dangerous to be kept as pets, may have value as meat in ethnic markets that cater to immigrants from Central and South America.

• However, make arrangements with the market manager before showing up with a sack of iguanas.
Practical Suggestions for Control of Iguanas in Southwest Florida

- Establish iguana control program to include measures such as natural enemies, capture and removal, shooting.
- More stringent regulation of the pet trade and pet shops involved in the sale of iguanas.
- Encourage local laws or regulations on the keeping of iguanas as pets.
- Encourage micro-chipping of every iguana sold and ascribe specific identifier to each pet-owner to create trace-back.
- Levy a fine (for trapping, removal, disposal) to pet owner or pet store found in breach of rules.