Ragweed parthenium, Parthenium hysterophorus
(Synonymous with false ragweed, whitetop)

By Stephen H. Futch and David W. Hall

Season: summer annual
Plant height: up to 4 feet tall
Roots: taproot
Stem: erect, hairy and branched
Leaf: alternate, stalked, short pube-scent, bipinnatifid (twice divided); lower leaves form basal rosette whereas upper leaves are entirely to slightly lobed
Flower: open branching, many branches, aster type clusters, arranged at the stem tip; hairy; both disc and ray flowers present; both are white and very small; disc flowers are tiny, less than one-fifth of an inch in size

Fruit: black, round nutlet and less than one-tenth of an inch in size

Distribution: throughout Florida and north into New York and Michigan and west into Texas

Additional comments: In many locations, this weed is becoming increasingly resistant to glyphosate in groves located on the east coast of Florida. Contact with any part can cause asthma, bronchitis, dermatitis and hay fever.

Burns faces investigation

By Kevin Bouffard

Jackie Burns faces a University of Florida investigation on charges of intellectual property theft for using data from a colleague in a professional journal article without proper attribution. The Ledger newspaper in Lakeland reported the allegations against Burns, the director of the Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred and the Southwest Florida Research and Education Center in Immokalee, on Oct. 11. Burns also oversees all citrus-related research for the university.

“In a publication, she reported data from our lab as her own data without our knowledge, and additionally she stated she and her (co-author) did experiments that they did not do,” William Dawson, a plant pathologist at the Lake Alfred center, wrote in an August email to UF’s chief auditor, Brian Mikell. “She stole data and lied in a publication.”

The university announced the investigation after The Ledger tried to contact Mikell and other UF officials to discuss Dawson’s allegation.

“UF’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Science(s) considers scientific integrity to be fundamental to its research mission. It is unclear why allegations regarding scientific integrity, which date back to 2009, have not been examined previously,” said the university’s Oct. 10 statement. “The University of Florida with IFAS’s full cooperation is looking into the substance of the allegations and the handling of the matter from 2009 until now,” it added. “UF’s vice president for research has begun an investigation to determine the facts so that UF can take appropriate action.”

Burns told The Ledger she failed to attribute to Dawson some parts of an article she and her post-doctoral assistant, Madhulika Sagaram, published in the March 2009 Journal of the American Society of Horticulture Science. Sagaram no longer works at the Lake Alfred center and could not be located.

Burns maintained Dawson freely shared the information used in the article and attributed the error to lack of communication between the two researchers and their assistants. There wasn’t any “malicious intent,” she said. “There was no intent to steal data,” Burns said. “I felt we were acting in good faith. Clearly he did not. I certainly agree we should have acknowledged he gave us access to his plants.”

Dawson did not accept Burns’ explanation. “If you are drunk and driving and run over somebody, you can say you didn’t mean it, but you’re still responsible,” he said.

Burns also told The Ledger she reported the dispute to top UF officials in the spring of 2009, as soon as Dawson raised objections about her using his data in the article.

The Ledger investigation began when Allan Burrage, a disgruntled former computer technician Burns fired in March, approached the newspaper in September. He claims Burns fired him because he blew the whistle on Dawson’s charge. Burrage acknowledged, and documents he provided show that Burns fired him on charges he had mishandled the switch-over of the Lake Alfred center’s independent computer network to the main UF system in 2011.

Kevin Bouffard reports on citrus and other topics for The Ledger, a daily newspaper in Lakeland.