

Beetle suspect in deaths of red bay trees

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Red bay trees across the southern United States are being threatened by a fungus introduced into the trees' stems by Asian Ambrosia beetles.

Experts tell the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville they fear the fungus delivered by the beetles might wipe out one of the South's most common trees and create dangerous conditions presented by falling trees and the ecological harm to creatures dependent on the trees.

Florida Forest Entomologist Bud Mayfield told the newspaper red bay trees are in the same family of trees as avocado and sassafras. Environmental officials are reportedly investigating whether the beetle is also involved in the recent death of some sassafras trees in Georgia.

The Asian Ambrosia beetle -- *Xyleborus glabratus* -- smaller than a match head, is a species of exotic bark beetle native to South Asia and first found in Georgia in 2002, the newspaper said. The beetles are believed to have reached the United States in packing crates and pallets.

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