

Weeds invading Mountain Area

By [Kristen Hoverman](#)

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The annual California Invasive Weeds Awareness Week ends tomorrow after a week of addressing problems caused by invasive plants in California and bringing attention to the work of local groups that work to protect natural areas and rangelands.

During the week, counties throughout California held work days, exhibits, and tours on invasive plants to spread awareness and actively work to clear areas of invasive weeds.

CIWAW starts the third Monday of July each year and is an opportunity to inform the public about local weed projects.

Invasive weeds are plants that have been introduced into an environment in which they did not evolve and have no natural enemies to limit their reproduction and spread. These weeds affect both agricultural and natural systems and cost the U.S. economy more than \$13 billion per year according to the California Invasive Plant Council Web site.

Cal-IPC is a non-profit organization with about 1,000 members. Cal-IPC's mission is to protect California wildlands from invasive plants through restoration, research and education.

"They displace native species changing the plant community in a way that native plants cannot grow back," said Cal-IPC Project Manager Elizabeth Brusati, about the invasive weeds. "Aquatic invasive species have a fast rate of growth and can spread to the extent of clogging the water system."

Clogging the water system can lead to a lack of oxygen for fish, reducing areas for water birds, clogging up pump stations and reduced recreation access.

"We have so many water issues," Local Watershed Coordinator Jeannie Habben said. "We don't need that."

Retired landscape contractor and local artist Ronna Adler agrees.

"They overwhelm the native plants," she said. "Invasive weeds are able to crowd out native plants impacting the natural areas."



Invasive weeds such as scotch broom have taken over the banks of local waterways and are now posing a fire and flood hazard.

Photo Michael Moore-SW School of Botanical Medicine, www.swsbm.com

Habben agrees that invasive weeds are impacting the community.

"They have no natural enemies that would keep them in check," she said. "They take over the land that belongs to the native plants. It's one of the biggest problems."

The biggest threats invasive weeds pose are flooding and fire hazards.

The invasive weeds can increase the spread and intensity of fire, Brusati said.

"What everybody does already is really necessary for fire danger and weed control," Adler said. "However, when they mow they also mow down our native flowers. There's two sides to everything."

Adler added that some of the invasive weeds in the area were commonly used in garden landscapes, while others were transported from European settlers. Weeds such as foxglove, scotch broom and tar weed were accidentally brought over in hay barrels by European settlers. The horehound weed was brought over to be used for tea and medicinal purposes.

"They can make a property just a mess to handle especially when you see horses grazing," Adler said. "The horses eat the native grasses which were very soft and pretty. Quite often it's completely taken over by the weeds."

Cal-IPC is educating the public about invasive weeds. The goal is to encourage gardeners to make informed choices when buying plants and to prevent the spread of harmful species, Brusati said.

About 85 percent of invasive woody plants in the United States were introduced for landscape trade and 53 percent of California's most invasive plants have horticultural origins. Nationally, more than \$137 billion is spent per year to manage the impacts of invasive species, and in California alone, \$87 million of taxpayer money goes to fighting invasive plants and animals every year, according to Terri Kempton's article "Fighting the Spread of Invasive Plants - Nurseries, Retailers, and Gardeners Unite."

Kempton is the project manager for Sustainable Conservation, a San Francisco-based non-profit environmental organization.

Sustainable Conservation and Cal-IPC helped form the California Horticultural Invasive Prevention Partnership (Cal-HIP). Sustainable Conservation manages the collaborative effort, which includes representation from the nursery and landscaping industries, Kempton said. Industry participants include representatives from growers, nurseries, Master Gardeners and professional associations.

The partnership aims to develop voluntary measures to reduce the number of invasive plant species sold in California and to prevent further invasions. Nurseries have volunteered to stop selling invasive plants.

"Their commitment to fight the spread of invasive plants shows that the horticulture industry can be an environmentally responsible 'green' industry," Kempton said.

In the Mountain Area Watershed Coordinator Jeannie Habben is spreading awareness about three invasive weeds that nurseries may be selling in other regions; arundo, scotch broom and tree of heaven. Habben is coordinator and facilitator of the Merced Watershed that stretches Mariposa and Madera Counties. The watershed is funded with a grant from the California Department of Conservation.

"It's everybody's watershed," Habben said. "Don't plant them. Don't buy them."

Local nurseries are not selling these invasive weeds, however, a hybrid non-invasive form of scotch broom is available.

Habben said the species of scotch broom to avoid is *genista canariensis*. This woody upright shrub has bright yellow pea-like flowers and produces large amounts of seeds that can last up to 80 years. *Genista canariensis* is extremely flammable and all parts of the plant are highly poisonous.

"This is the type that does the most damage," Adler said. "This is the type that has taken over large portions at Bass Lake."

Poisonous

According to an advisory produced by watershed officials, arundo and tree of heaven are also fire hazards and poisonous to people and animals.

Arundo is a false bamboo, or giant reed that spreads by the waterways. It can grow up to four inches per day and up to 30-feet tall, consuming 500 gallons of water per day per square yard. Arundo is highly flammable, burning even when green and grows back rapidly.

Tree of heaven is a deciduous tree up to 60-feet tall with gray bark and a life-span of 30 to 50 years. It produces large numbers of root sprouts and seeds, displacing vegetation and produces chemicals that may prevent native plants from establishing near by. Tree of heaven may pose a health threat to those who remove them. The sap may cause inflammation of the heart and other heart and gastrointestinal symptoms of illness if it gets into any openings of the skin.

"Don't Plant a Pest!" is a way of providing information to gardeners, Brusati said. Invasive plants are by nature a regional or local problem. A plant that jumps out of the garden in one climate and habitat type may behave perfectly in another.

The Cal-IPC Web site, <http://www.cal-ipc.org>, provides listings of weeds, plants and trees that are invasive and problematic in different regions and provides a listing of non-invasive alternatives that can be used.

So far the online listing is available for the Bay Area, Southern California and the Central Coast. Additional listings for the Sierra Foothills and the Central Valley should be available in August, Brusati said.

For more information on invasive weeds visit the Cal-IPC Web site: info@cal-ipc.org.



Invasive weeds are poisonous to humans and to local wildlife.

Photo by Kristen Hoverman