The Davis Enterprise

Gardeners learn to avoid invasive landscaping

ENTERPRISE STAFF

California's PlantRight campaign kicks off in the Central Valley this week, aimed at empowering home gardeners to avoid using invasive plants.

Invasive species are the second leading threat to wildlife and biodiversity, and are expensive for public parks and agencies to remove, according to campaign spokesmen.

Although most garden plants are not a threat, more than half of invasive plants originally arrived through gardens and landscaping, so home gardening choices matter.

Gardening experts and enthusiasts gathered Tuesday at the UC Davis Arboretum to learn how their smart choices can keep invasive plants from invading wildlands and harming wildlife — and how they can spread the word in their communities.

"Most of the plants used in gardens and landscaping do not invade wildlands and harm wildlife. But a few species can — and do — escape from cultivated areas into open landscapes and cause serious ecological problems," said Terri Kempton, PlantRight project manager at Sustainable Conservation.

"Fortunately, there are plenty of beautiful, safe alternatives to invasives, so it's easy for gardeners to find plants that meet all their specific needs," Kempton added.

The PlantRight campaign asks gardeners to: avoid planting invasives; plant beautiful non-invasive alternatives; and find local retail partners and other resources at PlantRight.org.

"Invasive plants like brooms, arundo donax and scarlet wisteria cause significant harm to parks and natural areas in the Central Valley," said Ruth Coleman, director of California state parks.

"They crowd out native plants, insects and animals. Once they take hold, they are expensive to remove or control. Invasions can also lead to flooding and fires."

The economic cost is as significant as the ecological cost: more than $35 billion per year nationally in eradication work and economic losses. In California alone, $85 million in taxpayer funds go to fighting invasive plants and animals every year, PlantRight says.

In addition to being environmentally responsible, some non-invasive plants can offer additional benefits such as drought resistance, lower fertilizer requirements and attracting wildlife.

For people living in a fire zone, planting non-invasive fire-safe plants can help protect their home and property.

For each region of California, PlantRight's steering committee identified the problem plants and non-invasive alternatives that will thrive in that area. For example, giant reed (Arundo donax) has invaded stream and river beds throughout the Central Valley, damaging ecosystems and increasing fire danger.

In the Bay Area, French and Spanish broom have taken over whole hillsides of public land and protected areas.

In wetter parts of the state, periwinkle (Vinca major) is creeping through forests and crowding out native plants and wildlife in the undergrowth.

The invasive plants and safe alternatives for each region are shown on the PlantRight Web site, www.PlantRight.org.

PlantRight is a statewide program designed to educate the horticultural industry and the gardening public to prevent new introductions of invasive plants in California. PlantRight was created by the steering committee of California Horticultural Invasives Prevention partnership with the ultimate goal of protecting California wildlands and wildlife from invasive plants.

COURTESY PHOTOS

Arundo donax has invaded stream and river beds throughout the Central Valley, damaging ecosystems and increasing fire danger.

There are many alternatives to invasive plants

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The following are notorious invasive plants and alternatives home gardeners can use instead.

Invasive

Brooms: Brooms have invaded California hillsides and caused significant ecological harm. For years, gardeners were attracted to French, Spanish and Scotch broom because of their hardy nature and fragrant yellow blossoms every spring. Now we know that these hardy plants are capable of invading wildlands and natural areas.

Throughout the West Coast, broom plants have taken over native habitat. They block light and use up water, resulting in many native species becoming locally extinct.

Brooms can produce up to 12,000 seeds per plant, making it difficult to control once established. They form dense stands and eliminate native habitats. Brooms can invade even intact native ecosystems — and regrow after fire and grazing are used to control them.

They were first recorded as an invasive problem on Catalina Island in 1967; by 2003 there were almost 2 million square feet invaded.

Alternatives

- Forsythia (Forsythia x intermedia)
- Shrubby Cinquefoil (Potentilla fruticosa)
- Yellow bush daisy (Euryops pectinatus)
- Bush marigold (Tagetes lemmonii)
- California flannel bush (Fremontodendron californicum, F. cultivars)

Invasive

Giant reed (Arundo donax): If you walk along one of the many California streams invaded with arundo donax, or giant reed, you won't hear any bird song. Arundo forms massive stands that crowd out the native plants that provide valuable habitat for birds and other wildlife. At least 10 protected animal species in California, including the least Bell's vireo, suffer habitat loss to invading arundo.

These tall plants burn quickly and at high temperatures, allowing flames to jump streams that would normally act as barriers to the spread of wildfires.

Scotch broom has taken over hillsides in temperate climates.

Alternatives

- Clumping bamboos (Bamboos multiplex, B. oldhamii, Fargesia nitida)
- New Zealand flax (Phormium tenax cultivars)

Invasive

Scarlet wisteria (Sesbania punicea): Wisteria creates dense thickets, usually along riverbanks, where other plants are excluded from the understory.

These small trees are mostly found along rivers, channels, and in other wet places like marshes and the margins of ponds, ditches, and canals.

All parts of the plant are poisonous to birds, reptiles, and mammals, and it displaces plants used by native wildlife and blocks their access to water.

These small trees have spread rapidly, covering more than 100 linear miles along Dry Creek in the Sacramento area in just six years. The prolific seeds of the plant are able to float downstream and start new colonies within months of their own establishment. Each plant can produce up to 1,000 seed pods per year — that's about 500 seeds per square meter.

Alternatives

- Brazilian flame bush (Calliandra tweedii)
- Crape myrtle (Lagerstroemia spp.)
- Gold medallion tree (Cassia leptophylla)
- Island bush snapdragon (Galvezia speciosa)