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# Home & Garden

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## Don't plant a pest

### PlantRight urges gardeners to stay away from invasives

By [Laura Christman](#) (Contact)  
Saturday, August 16, 2008

Some garden plants grow eagerly, defy disease and demand little. But being no problem at all, it turns out, actually can be a problem.

Self-reliant, prolific plants can escape home landscapes, putting down roots in wild places where they cause all sorts of troubles. The pushy plants slurp up water, change the soil chemistry and reproduce so quickly that they choke out native vegetation. What was once a tapestry of different native plants becomes a monoculture that doesn't provide the right food or shelter for birds, butterflies, lizards, deer and other wild creatures. Invasive plants also can divert streams and cause flooding. Some are so flammable that they invite intense fires to wetlands that aren't adapted to them.

Plants gone bad are bad news.

PlantRight, a partnership of environmental groups, growers, public agencies, university researchers and others, wants to stop them.

Home gardening choices matter, Terri Kempton, PlantRight manager, said in a phone interview from her San Francisco office.

Many of the scrappy plants causing problems up and down California were originally welcomed into home landscapes, where they were valued for erosion control, screening, pretty flowers or their easygoing nature.

PlantRight kicked off in 2007. Its first year was focused on trying to get retailers not to sell plants that can be invasive. This year the emphasis is on educating home gardeners.

The PlantRight campaign covers plants that are still available in nurseries and garden centers. The more notorious bad boys of the invasive plant world, such as yellow starthistle and tree of heaven, are not part of the campaign because they aren't retail plants.

PlantRight's Web site,

[www.plantright.org](http://www.plantright.org), breaks out problem plants by region. On the Central Valley list are arundo, blue gum, brooms, Chinese tallow tree, pampas grass, periwinkle, Russian olive, saltcedar and scarlet wisteria.

North state plant and environmental experts say not all of those plants are problems in our piece of the Central Valley. But it's still wise to be wary, according to Melinda Graves, a soil conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Redding. "It's better to err on the side of caution. If a plant has a negative effect in one place, it may take longer to get established here, but it could become problematic."

Susan Libonati, president of the Shasta chapter of the California

Native Plant Society, said our area's cold winters and dry conditions discourage some plants from spreading. Moist areas seem to be the most prone to invasives, she said.

Arundo, which grows in bamboo-like clumps along creeks, streams and rivers, is a big concern in Shasta County.

#### Photo Gallery

**BUYER BEWARE: THE PLANTS CAN GO WILD**



Arundo donax was planted for years throughout California for erosion control and screening. It also is used to make reeds for musical instruments. Arundo looks similar to bamboo and grows in dense stands along creeks and streams. It chokes out native plants, hogs water and is a fire risk. "Once you get it started, it burns like gasoline," said Randall Smith, who is involved with arundo eradication in the north state. "Arundo is a huge problem in our area," said soil conservationist Melinda Graves. [View gallery >](#)

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Photo courtesy of Plantright

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Photo courtesy of Plantright

PlantRight says not to buy Scotch broom, striated broom, French broom, bridal veil broom or Spanish broom. A single broom can produce 12,000 seeds and seeds can be viable for more than 20 years. "We're very concerned about brooms," said Shasta County Agriculture Commissioner Mary Pfeiffer. Nurseries sell sterile varieties, but Caryn Moen, an agricultural investigator for the county said, "There's no hard-and-fast evidence that every one is sterile. We encourage people not to plant them."

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Photo courtesy of Plantright

Saltcedar (*Tamarix ramosissima*) is a big problem in desert areas. It is a high water user and adds salt to the soil surface, making areas unacceptable for native plants. "It's horrible. Saltcedar is a true pest," said Caryn Moen, an agricultural and standards investigator for Shasta County. Saltcedar has been found along Cottonwood Creek in Tehama County.

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Photo courtesy of Plantright

Periwinkle (*Vinca major*) is often found at old homesteads, near parks, along creeks and in shady drainages. It sprawls and spreads by stems that root. "It takes over everything in no time," said soil conservationist Melinda Graves, noting she's seen infestations along Cow Creek in Shasta County.

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Photo courtesy of Plantright

Pampas grass (*Cortaderia jubata* or *Cortaderia selloana*) is known for its showy seed-heads. A single plume can contain 10,000 seeds, which can blow for miles in the wind, PlantRight says. Pampas grass is a big problem in coastal areas. There are occasionally wayward pampas grass plants in the north state, but it is not a plant of high concern here.

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Photo courtesy of Plantright

This ornamental tree (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*) is spread by the seeds in its mealy fruits. It puts up with very cold and very hot temperatures and has escaped to riparian areas throughout California, where it pushes out native willows and other plants. Experts say this tree is not common in wild areas of the north state.

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Photo courtesy of Plantright

Blue gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*) is mostly found in the state's coast ranges, although it does grow in low-elevation inland areas too. Its shed leaves and bark strips have chemicals that inhibit other plants from growing. The tree is very flammable. Native plant and invasive plant experts say the tree has not been a problem in the north state.

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Photo courtesy of Plantright

Chinese tallow (*Sapium sebiferum*) is a fast-growing tree. The fat of its seeds is used to make candles, soap and other items. It spreads readily by seeds. It is a big problem in Southeastern parts of the United States and has recently been found invading wetland areas in some parts of California. Experts say it isn't a pest in the north state — yet.

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