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Ornamental plants can invade the countryside

*By Jeanne Rose
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All over California, natural wildlands and parks are under attack from invasive plants that started out harmlessly in our home gardens then escaped into the countryside and went wild.

It's not that all ornamental plants pose this threat, but certain ones are capable of getting established and taking over hundreds and sometimes thousands of acres.

Many of these "exotic" plants came from Europe or Asia and were brought to this country by our ancestors.

As native habitat is replaced by exotic plants, many species of birds, insects, fish and other wildlife are displaced or lost.

People are affected, too. Pest plants that invade riparian areas often clog our waterways so that water cannot move down the river or stream. Others use much more water than native species use to grow. Riparian pest plants are essentially robbing water from people and wildlife.

Pest plants that invade ravines, foothills and chaparral areas often pose a greater fire threat than native species because they increase wildfire frequency or because they pose a bigger fuel threat. It has been estimated that invasive pest plants cost California hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

The California Invasive Plant Council (Cal-IPC, pronounced Calipsy), whose membership includes land managers, consultants, scientists, planners, nonprofit organization volunteers and others, is an authoritative source of information on all aspects of wildland weed management.

Gardeners don't plant invasive species intentionally. Invasive plants are, by nature, a regional or local problem. A plant that jumps out of the garden in one climate may behave perfectly in another.

The council has developed a categorized list of invasive exotic plants, which includes many of the ones commonly grown in our own gardens. They also suggest safe noninvasive alternatives to plant instead.

Its list gives both the common and botanical (Latin) names, the habitats of concern and the geographical distribution of each plant. The list is further divided into sections dealing with the most invasive, lesser invasive, explosive (rapid) potential to spread, unsure about spread (not enough information is currently available about the plant), annual grasses that pose significant threat to wildlands and those plants (after a status review) that do not appear to be a threat.

The list is downloadable from the Web site www.cal-ipc.org. The council works to protect California's wildlands from invasive plants through research, restoration and education.

To date, only a few plants on the list are problems here in the San Joaquin Valley. Tree-of-heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) should be renamed the tree-of-hell because its root system is very invasive and the tree is very difficult to get rid of where it is not wanted.

It tolerates our Central Valley climate and can be seen along roads on the Valley floor and through the foothills. It invades riparian areas, grasslands and oak woodlands. Its leaves are similar in shape to

those of the Raywood ash, Chinese pistache or black walnut tree. Other invasive trees are the Chinese tallowtree (*Sapium sebiferum*) and Saltcedar (*Tamarix* sp.).

Giant reed (*Arundo donax*) is an extremely fast-growing plant, similar looking to bamboo, that grows in areas along creeks and streams and can easily take over the entire waterway. Crimson fountaingrass (*Pennisetum setaceum*) and Pampasgrass (*Cortaderia selloana*), though beautiful to watch move in the wind, are easily spread by it too. Russian olive (*Elaeagnus augustifolia*) spreads by seed and is a problem in some of our riparian areas. Yellow water iris (*Iris pseudacorus*) is also a problem in riparian and wetland areas. Woolly or common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*) is considered a problem throughout California. The scarlet wisteria tree (*Sesbania punica*) invades riparian areas, including the San Joaquin River Parkway.

Even the Periwinkle groundcover (*Vinca major*) and English ivy (*Hedera helix*) can take over a yard and damage buildings and fences. When birds drop seeds from these ivies near a stream, the plants can take over, displacing native vegetation and degrading wildlife habitat.

In 2004 another group called Cal-HIP, or Horticultural Invasives Prevention, was formed and developed PlantRight.org. It works with the horticulture industry of California to find practical and collaborative solutions to protect the wildlands.

Together they decide if invasive plants should be removed from the nursery and not sold in California or be tagged as invasive.

What should you do if you have some of these invasive plants in your garden?

There's no need to rush right out to get rid of them, especially if they are suited to your landscape and property. But you should be aware that they pose a threat to the countryside if they escape from your yard.

Many of us have backyards that border riparian areas, vacant lots or neighboring farmland and pastures. You can use the runaways to your advantage on your own property, but please be careful with California's property. Try to stop the invasion before it starts.

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