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Battle against invasives begins at home

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Gardeners love to grow French broom. Its slender branches and vibrant yellow flowers grow easily. The nursery industry also likes the pretty shrub because it germinates easily and produces seed prolifically. When a successful non-native variety like French broom comes along, growers cultivate the plant and it tends to do well. Really well.

Nonendemic plants thrive because they have few competitors to curb excessive growth and “keeping (them) in your yard is difficult,” said Robert Dolezal, executive vice-president of the nursery trade organization California Association of Nurseries and Garden Centers. The nursery industry can actually serve as a “pest pathway” to perpetuate the spread of these noxious weeds, according to San Mateo County Agricultural Commissioner Fred Crowder.

San Mateo County has thousands of non-native plants and about 300 weedy non-native species. The county has essentially thrown in the towel on totally eradicating these intruders and has instead resolved to control the spread. The county’s agricultural department is actively trying to eliminate about a dozen of these weeds, with over half originating from the nursery trade.

The California Department of Agriculture keeps “do not grow” lists, but the county has stepped in because the state’s standards are too lax, according to the county’s weed management group.

The state is more concerned with plants that affect agriculture in general, but weed management groups are also concerned with weeds that are bothersome to natural habitat, according to San Mateo County Deputy Agricultural Commissioner Ronald Pummer, who is involved with the Weed Management Area Group.

Groups like California Invasive Plant Council and Plant Right, an offshoot of California Horticultural Invasives Prevention, have sprouted to take up the challenge. These organizations are working to develop resources to control the spread of noxious weeds.

In a pilot study of San Mateo and Santa Clara county nursery markets between 2005 and 2008, Plant Right found a decrease in invasive plant sales. The study concluded that some plants like periwinkle and green fountain grass are still popular, but nurseries no longer sell plants like eucalyptus, ice plant and French broom.

Their analysis of nursery supply chains found the top 20 California sellers make up 80 percent of the state’s plant sales. To stop the pipeline of invasive plant species, Plant Right is working directly with the state’s top sellers as well as the top 25 growers to use scientific research and nonregulatory means to collaborate with the plant industry.

“We’re working directly with the nursery industry in part of the study to understand what retailers are selling invasive plants so we can partner with them,” said Plant Right project manager Christiana Conser. She added that Plant Right’s analysis protects the names of the

nurseries involved in its study.

“For every invasive (species) someone wants to plant, there are many others that fill that niche that aren’t a concern,” said Dolezal, whose trade organization is also a Plant Right partner. Dolezal added that the trade organization is educating growers about plants and discouraging them from cultivating problematic plants.

“None of our local nurseries are growing plants on the ‘do not grow’ lists, to our knowledge,” Crowder said. He added that small, local nurseries are very responsive generally, but the larger statewide and national nursery outlets are less so because they tend to be dictated by corporate headquarters.

Nurserymen’s Exchange, one of the largest wholesale plant growers in the state, isn’t as concerned with the threat of invasive species in its business. “This is not really an issue for greenhouses like ours that sell mostly indoor plants,” said Don Mendel, a spokesman for the company. The state inspects all of the plants Nurserymen’s Exchange brings into the greenhouses as well as those it sends out of state, Mendel said.

Half Moon Bay Nursery owner Ron Mickelsen said, besides using common sense, his business doesn’t have any set policy for dealing with non-native plants. “Probably 99 percent of plants in California were introduced. Particularly on the Coastside, there are very few natural plants,” Mickelsen said.

“Along the coast, part of it is nursery trade and part of it is people dumping,” said John Beall, a biologist for the county’s agriculture department. “There’s some Canary Islands St. John’s Wort and then a refrigerator and a bunch of trash. People throwing their garden waste on the side of the road can spread weeds too.”

Paul Keel, California State Parks’ sector superintendent for the area, noted success in eradicating pockets of non-native species along the coast like pampas grass and gorse spikes. “We have an obligation to do (this) and offer up what it looked like years ago,” Keel said.

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