

Don't Be Fooled by *Unwise Water-Wise Plant Choices*

by PlantRight's Greg Richardson

California's drought is popularizing low-water landscaping: lawns are coming out, xeriscaping is going in.

Fortunately, water agencies, nurseries, and garden media are all promoting drought-tolerant plant lists to guide purchasing decisions and reduce water usage. Unfortunately, in this rush for water conservation, invasive plants are creeping onto some of these lists! Maybe you've already noticed...

There is little surprise that many invasive plants are drought-resistant. By definition, invasive plants can spread into new regions and take over without extra fertilizers or irrigation. Water-wise lists that include drought-tolerant plants are missing the point, however.

Why? An invasive plants' damaging impacts are numerous. For example, in Southern California green fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*) plants do not provide habitat or forage for wildlife and add considerable fuel-load to wildfires. Other plants can alter soil composition, influence erosion, or even affect our waterways. Giant reed (*Arundo donax*), was previously a common ornamental that now grows densely in stream banks, increasing flood impacts and clogging water passages. Lastly, the use of herbicides on invasive plants, while in many cases the best available option, poses risk to water quality in our streams, aquifers and oceans.

With this in mind, gardeners and landscape professionals can be truly "water-wise" by:

1. Insisting on non-invasive plants when designing drought-tolerant landscapes. Plants that we've seen (in order of prevalence) on drought-tolerant plant lists include:
 - Mexican feathergrass (*Nassella or Stipa tenuissima*) – emerging invasive,
 - Green fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*),
 - Highway iceplant, (*Carpobrotus edulis*),
 - Pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*),
 - Capeweed (*Arctotheca calendula*) and
 - Big leaf periwinkle (*Vinca major*).

Visit www.PlantRight.org/regions to determine where in our state these plants are a risk and to find beautiful alternatives to use instead.

2. When you see invasive plants on drought-tolerant plant lists, let the creators of that list know. The staff at PlantRight would also appreciate learning about this in order to help to find noninvasive, water-wise alternatives to recommend instead.

Thank you for helping to protect our water - in California's ornamental *and* natural landscapes!

For more information, visit www.plantright.org or contact plantright@suscon.org.