Specialists declare war on invasive plants

By TAMARA KOEHLER
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Putting aside years of mistrust, California's $20.4 billion horticulture industry is collaborating with the environmentalist camp on the hot-button issue of invasive plants.

The unusual partnership has launched a new initiative to eliminate invasive plants from California's horticulture trade and prevent the introduction of new ones. Dubbed "PlantRight," the education and outreach program aims to identify plants in the nursery trade that are invasive, such as certain varieties of ice plant, and replace them with profitable alternatives.

In the case of ice plant, which covers public roadsides up and down the coast, there are several varieties that could be sold that are not invasive, according to the PlantRight brochure.

In California, clearing public lands of aggressive foreign plants such as arundo, ice plant and pampas grass costs taxpayers $85 million a year. Nationwide, the price tag for crops and farmland damaged by the spread of invasive plants tops $33 billion a year, according to federal estimates.

More than 50 percent of these invaders are introduced through the ornamental nursery industry, according to UC Davis figures.

"There are three hot-button issues in California in the agricultural industry: water, immigration and invasive plants," said Nicholas Staddon, a director with national grower Monrovia Nursery, based in Visalia.

"There has been a lot of friction. We as an industry don't want to be legislated on invasive plants, and that's where it seems we were headed. If we're causing a bump in the road, we want to be part of the solution."

A brochure for consumers called "Don't Plant a Pest" -- available from the California Invasive Plant Council -- has been in circulation for several years.

The PlantRight program targets the horticulture industry and blends science, education and reasonable expectations, said Teri Hampton with the San Francisco-based, nonprofit Sustainable Conservation. Perhaps most important, participation is voluntary, she said.

"Without the industry's cooperation and ownership of the issue, it's been more of a fight and conflict than making progress," Hampton said. "The industry wants to do the right thing, but lots of times people don't have the information, and then there's the long-standing antagonism between environmentalist groups and the horticulture trade."

Sustainable Conservation specializes in bringing opposing sides together to solve environmental problems.

Three years ago, Hampton invited growers, seed suppliers, native plant advocates and environmentalists to the table, and the California Horticultural Invasives Prevention group was formed.

The group hammered out a set of guidelines and a code of conduct on the production and sale of invasive plants for nurseries and associations to adopt. Last year, the California Association of Nurseries and Garden Centers adopted the code of conduct.

Just what constitutes an invasive plant remains controversial. The PlantRight program has listed the big offenders for each region of the state, taking into account that while arundo gobbles up riverside habitat in Ventura County, it's not going to flourish in arid Palm Springs.

In Ventura County, the invasives listed are arundo, highway and crystalline ice plant, pampas grass, Vinca major (periwinkle), tamarisk, green fountain grass, myoporum, blue gum eucalyptus and several varieties of brooms.

About 20 percent of plants in California are non-native, but only 2.5 percent of those are considered invasive. Incriminating characteristics include fast growth rate and flowering.

"All the things that make a good ornamental plant unfortunately also make a good invasive weed," said David Chang, a weed specialist with the Santa Barbara County Agricultural Commissioner's Office.

Chang recently held a seminar on invasive plants for the California Department of Transportation, which has put
ice plant along the state’s highways.

Monrovia grows pampas grass as well as the popular Scotch and Spanish brooms and vinca varieties. Pampas is not shipped to coastal areas, where it has spread fiercely, he said. But periwinkle, ice plant and ivy are a sticking point.

"We're examining our inventory and identifying possible problem plants, but ice plant, vinca and ivy is where we need to reach a compromise," he said.

Those plants are often used in cities and towns, where they have little chance to spread, he said.

Nursery stock is the second most lucrative crop in Ventura County, bringing in $213.7 million annually, according to Agricultural Commissioner Earl McPhail.

Somis grower John Schoustra is cautiously supportive of the new initiative, especially if the decisions are based on science.

In the past, advocacy groups have pushed for regulations banning the sale of plants like fan palms and have pressured big stores like Wal-Mart to yank pampus grass from their stock in five Western states. The latter cost California growers who sold the grass to other states hundreds of thousands of dollars, he said.

"Their stance has been too broad, too overreaching," said Schoustra, president of the Nursery Growers Association of California.

"No grower or nursery wants to be harboring Typhoid Mary, but in some places, plants can be safely produced."

(Contact Tamara Koehler of the Ventura County Star in California at www.venturacountystar.com.)