

Invasive plants and California gardens

All over California, natural areas and parks are under attack by invasive plants. As the population of the state increases, we lose natural habitats that can support native wildlife and plants. When non-native plants invade the precious remaining habitats, the ecosystems are disrupted and degraded because these plants push out the native plants that provide useful shelter, nest sites, and food for native birds, mammals, and other creatures.



Thousands of species of landscape ornamentals are used in California. Only a small percentage has become invasive pest plants in the wild. But, these species constitute over half of the worst invasive plants in the state. Brazilian peppertree (*Schinus terebinthifolius*), shown above, is a problem in wetland habitats in southern California. It is important that gardeners recognize this problem and make informed choices when selecting landscape ornamentals to help preserve California's natural beauty.

California is very diverse ecologically. Just because a garden plant is invasive in one area of the state does not mean it will be a problem in all areas of California. Myoporum (*Myoporum laetum*), shown below in an estuary in San Diego County, is invasive along much of the California coastline. However, it is not likely to be a problem when used as a landscape plant in the desert or other inland areas of California.



In the **interior desert** areas of California, the following are examples of plants that should not be used for landscaping, because they are known to be invasive in the region. Consult your local nursery professional, UC Master Gardener, or an advisor at the University of California Cooperative Extension Office for other plants with similar characteristics that are not invasive. Remember, to protect California's beautiful natural habitats, choose your garden plants wisely to **KEEP IT IN THE GARDEN**.

RUSSIAN OLIVE

Eleagnus angustifolia



Photo courtesy of John M. Randall, The Nature Conservancy

Russian olive is a small deciduous tree that has been in cultivation for about 100 years in the western US. It is native to the Asia and is grown for its yellow flowers, as windbreaks, for soil stabilization, and as wildlife habitat. The seed, however, are readily consumed by a variety of birds, which spread the seed long distances. Today, Russian olive is an invasive weed along streams and rivers in most western states.

Russian olive tolerates saline or alkaline soils, flooding, drought, temperatures up to 115 and down to -50⁰ F, and any kind of soil. This degree of environmental tolerance, the very features that make it so easy to grow in the home landscape, also make it very competitive against the native trees and shrubs.

Fountaingrass
Pennisetum setaceum

Fountaingrass is a popular perennial ornamental grass. Many varieties are sold, typically used as a drought tolerant border or for bank stabilization along roads. Some varieties are sold as sterile, but there is no recognized method for verifying sterility. Even sterile ones are sometimes capable of producing seed without being pollinated. The seed is easily transported by wind, water, in mud on vehicles, and by livestock.



Fountaingrass is a very aggressive competitor against native bunch grasses and forbs. It tolerates fire better than the natives and actually increases fires by adding to the fuel load.

For more information on the subject of invasive plants, we suggest the following websites:

- ✦ wric.ucdavis.edu – the site for the University of California Davis Weed Research and Information Center
- ✦ caleppc.org – the site for the California Exotic Pest Plant Council
- ✦ invasivespecies.gov – the gateway site for the federal government invasive species programs

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