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### ***Invasive Ornamental Plants***

In a world of more than 200,000 species of plants, you're bound to have a few bad apples. Or at least you're bound to have a few plants that don't play well with others. A few types of plants grow faster than other plants—they spread out and take over more and more space, stealing water, sunlight and nutrients from other plants. Some plants even engage in chemical warfare, preventing other plants from growing around them. These plant species are ultra-competitive because they need to compete with other plants in their home range. When we move ultra-competitive plants to a new location, for instance Hawaii, we remove their competition and they become invasive species.

One of the best-known examples of an invasive ornamental plant is miconia. In its native range of Central America, miconia trees are not easy to find because they are kept in check by other plants that are more competitive. Plant enthusiasts like miconia because of its large velvety green leaves with bright purple undersides, and it was planted in gardens in Tahiti in 1937. Since then, miconia has spread across 2/3rds of the island, outcompeting virtually all other plants in the forest. Its large leaves and thick growth shades out other plants and reduces the amount of water that reaches the ground, damaging the watershed. Miconia was brought to Hawaii where it was planted and sold between the late 1950s and 1990s. Today, miconia is on the State Noxious Weeds list, making it illegal to sell, and crews are working in the forest to contain the infestations on Kauai, Oahu, Maui and the Big Island. The infestation on the Big Island is the largest, with over 110,000 acres containing miconia.

While miconia is no longer being sold, other invasive ornamentals are just starting to show their invasive qualities, and have not yet been added to the Hawaii Department of Agriculture's Noxious Weeds List.

For example, Australian tree fern became a popular replacement for the native Hawaiian tree fern, hapu`u, which were in such high demand that they were being stolen from the forests. Australian tree ferns have spread from their plantings as tiny spores, carried by wind into wet forests where they are outcompeting other plants for space and water. One infestation is in the Alaka`i Wilderness Preserve on Kauai, where the nearest parent plant is miles away.

Another example is rubbervine, a plant that has been one of the ten worst weeds in Western Australia for years, costing millions of dollars in damage to agriculture annually. Despite its notoriety Downunder, rubbervine was on its way to becoming a popular ornamental in Hawaii due to its beauty and tolerance for arid conditions and poor soil. Although there are several plantings of rubbervine on each island, the largest infestation is on the south east side of Molokai, where a few plants produced hundreds of seeds that blew across more than five acres, and ended up in 13 different infestations.

Some other plants are on the State Noxious Weeds list, but are still planted occasionally for various reasons, including mistaken identity. One plant, fountain grass, was planted as an ornamental on a single property on the Big Island in the 1960's. This grass is native to Africa, and it is adapted to dry conditions and wildfires. In Hawaii, it is responsible for fueling huge wildfires and replacing native dry forests. Today, when you visit Kona, it is the first plant you see, and it covers more than 200,000 acres of lava fields and former dryland forest. More than once, people have seen this plant on the Big Island, thought it was native pili grass, and took seeds home to neighbor islands to grow.

And there are more people buying plants via the internet. It is unnerving to think that with just a couple of mouse clicks, you can have rubbervine, pampas grass, butterfly bush, and so many other plants or seeds delivered to your doorstep within 48 hours.

The questions we need to ask ourselves are, "Do I know what I'm inviting onto my property? Will this be the right plant, not just for the right place, but also for Hawaii?"

The good news is that there are resources available to help us make better, more informed choices today. Remember that a small portion of plants being used and sold today are invasive, so everyone that buys or uses plants must choose wisely. Here's what you can do to help prevent the spread of the next invasive ornamental plant.

1. Do some research. Resource managers and agencies frequently post the invasive plants that they are working on in Hawaii. Google the plant name, the word "invasive" and "Hawaii" to see if it brings up any red flags.
2. Ask your nurseryman, landscaper, landscape architect, or garden mart clerk about the plants they plant to use or sell. Insist on non-invasive plants.
3. Consider planting native Hawaiian plants that are appropriate for the area and conditions on your property. Visit the Hawaii Department of Health's website for an on-line handbook on How to Plant a Native Hawaiian Garden.  
<http://www.state.hi.us/health/oeqc/garden/eioegpic.htm>
4. If you plant something that is showing signs of being invasive, consider removing and replacing it, or at the very least, consider taking steps to keep the plant from seeding and spreading.

Some commonly sold invasive plants to avoid:

1. Australian tree fern (*Cyathea cooperi*)
2. Rubbervine (*Cryptostegia grandiflora* and *C. madagascariensis*)
3. Smokebush (*Buddleja madagascariensis*)
4. Butterfly bush (*Buddleja davidii*)
5. Pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana* and *C. jubata*\*\*)

6. Hiptage (*Hiptage benghalensis*)
7. Fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*\*\*)
8. Glorybush (*Tibuchina urvilleana*\*\*)
9. Fiddlewood (*Citharexylum spinosum* and *C. caudatum*)
10. Kahili ginger (*Hedychium gardnerianum*)
11. Common St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*)
12. Indian rhododendron (*Melastoma candidum*\*\*)

\*\*note: denotes Hawaii State Noxious Weeds that are still used and sold occasionally.

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Christy Martin is the Public Information Officer for the statewide Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species (CGAPS) and the Invasive Species Committees of Hawaii (ISCs). Statewide and island-based partnerships working to protect Hawaii from invasive species. [www.hear.org/cgaps](http://www.hear.org/cgaps)

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*page 2 of 2*