Fountaingrass is a tall, graceful perennial bunchgrass that was introduced to the United States from Africa and the Middle East for use as an ornamental landscape accent plant. It has escaped cultivation in California, Arizona, Hawaii, and other areas, showing a marked ability to adapt to different environments. Its range is continually expanding, and it is a serious problem in Southern California and desert regions of the southwestern United States and Mexico.

Why should we be concerned?

Fountaingrass has become a damaging invasive weed in other states. Dense colonies crowd out other species and are difficult to control. It is well adapted to fire, and plants regrow rapidly after a fire. The increased fuel load from tinder-dry fountaingrass foliage increases the intensity and spread of fires, resulting in severe damage to desirable vegetation. The thick infestations of fountaingrass also interfere with efforts to restore native plant species, and impair wildlife habitat.

What does fountaingrass look like?

Fountaingrass is a showy plant with a characteristic densely clumped growth form. The erect stems grow from 1 foot to 5 feet tall. The leaves are long and narrow, with a smooth leaf sheath. Midveins are pronounced on the underside. Some cultivars have reddish or purple foliage. The distinctive flower head is borne on the end of a spike. The flowers resemble bottlebrushes, 6 inches to 15 inches long, and have many small, light pink to purple spikelets, which contain the flowers. The plants flower from May through October. The roots of the plants are fibrous, and will grow a foot deep or more. Fountaingrass is a bunchgrass, and does not have rhizomes.

Where does it grow?

In California, fountaingrass is found in the central and southwestern regions and coastal areas, generally at elevations below 2000 feet. In Hawaii, however, the extraordinary ability of this weed to adapt to different ecosystems allows it to grow from sea level to subalpine sites at 9,184 feet. It appears to be limited to areas with a median annual rainfall of less than 50 inches.

Fountaingrass grows in grasslands, deserts, canyons, and disturbed areas along roadsides, especially near urban areas. It can even grow in rock crevices and pavement cracks, but does not tolerate saline soils well.
How does it spread?

Seed spreads Fountaingrass. The spikelets have bristles, and are spread in late spring by wind, water, human activities, and by sticking to animals. Seeds will survive in the soil for as long as seven years, and individual plants may live 20 years or more.

This invasive weed is also sold by retail nurseries for use in ornamental landscapes, and is sometimes planted for bank stabilization along roads. While the nursery varieties are said to be sterile, there is no clear evidence that they will not add to the spread of fountaingrass. Several varieties of *Pennisetum setaceum* may be sold, ranging in color from reddish to rose or purple. All cultivars are considered invasive and should not be sold or planted.

Other ornamental grasses are available that will provide desirable landscape accents. Grasses to try include:

- *Miscanthus* species (autumn light, others)
- *Muhlenbergia* species (deer grass, bull grass, others)
- *Dasylirion wrightii* (desert spoon)
- *Elymus glaucus* (blue lyme grass)
- *Stipa tenennisima* (Mexican feather grass)
- *Nolina* species
- *Festuca amethystina* (sheep’s fescue, others)
- *Panicum virgatum* (switchgrass).

How is fountaingrass controlled?

It will take a concerted effort to control a long-standing infestation of this weed. To avoid increasing the seed bank, it is essential to develop an early detection program and to remove individual plants before seeds are produced. For small infestations, a string trimmer or hand weeding can be effective. Remove seed stalks before they flower or set seed.

Once a plant is more than 6 inches in diameter, tools such as picks, shovels, or mattocks will be needed to uproot it. If seeds have been produced, remove the flower heads and place them securely in a plastic bag. Once the plants have been removed, it may be useful to apply a preemergent herbicide if seeds have already scattered.

Fire is not useful as a control method, as fountaingrass recovers quickly after a fire, and may actually increase in density.

Currently, no biocontrol agents are available for fountaingrass. Grazing has been used in Hawaii, but cattle will only eat the fountaingrass when no other grasses are available.

For major infestations, it may be necessary to use systemic preemergent herbicides such as hexazinone (Velpar®), or post-emergent grass specific herbicides once a year. Other post-emergence herbicides including glyphosate (Roundup®) have not provided consistently effective control.

Near streams or rivers, or in areas with shallow water tables, special care must be taken when applying herbicides. Pesticides must be applied according to the label directions on the pesticide container to be lawfully and effectively applied.

References:

Crimson fountaingrass.

http://pi.cdfa.ca.gov/weedinfo/PENNISET2.htm


http://plants.usda.gov/cgi_bin/plant_profile.cgi?symbol=PESE3

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