

Green Fountain Grass-a problem for our environment



When we hear that a plant is a weed, we often envision something unpleasant to see or have nearby, like a nettle or some thistles. If that were true, weed control would be less challenging than it is – everyone would want to pull the pests up!

The unfortunate fact is: a plant need not be ugly to pose a big problem. Some of our most environmentally destructive weeds were actually introduced as lovely landscape plants!

Only after they have become

overly successful, crowding out members of the native plant community, does their negative potential become clear.

One of those is green fountaingrass, *Pennisetum setaceum*. Horticulturists originally promoted the use of this African grass, believing that it was sterile and would not invade neighboring areas. This was, sadly, inaccurate. Now it is recognized, not as a lovely landscape plant, but as an environmental pest. It is included in the Nevada Noxious Weed list, which means it cannot be sold or installed within the state.

This clumping grass produces tall (up to five feet) flower plumes with large volumes of seed. These seeds are not only numerous, but they also remain viable in the soil for several years. The seeds are abundant, permitting the plant to spread throughout the southwest.

It appears wherever it can find water – washes, the banks of the Colorado River, the shores of Lake Mead, even in highway medians. Green fountain grass has a higher growth rate than other, native grasses, hence it can out-compete them. If it is not controlled in wild areas, it can become a dominant species within three years of its first appearance. It is not good forage for grazing animals who can suffer for lack of quality browsing material.

Another problem is that it is well adapted to fire. Many southern Nevada native plants are not able to tolerate fires, but fountain grass can. After an intense blaze there can be a significant increase in its population, at the expense of indigenous plants. This can have a negative impact on ground nesting birds and other ground dwellers.

Nevadans were using green fountain grass in their landscapes because it is attractive and very easy to maintain. For this reason, some people are hesitant about removing it. This is less of a problem than it may seem; other beautiful, low-maintenance flowering grasses available to homeowners.

One is a truly sterile cousin of green fountain grass – red fountain grass (*P. setaceum* var. *rubrum*). Some varieties produce nearly purple foliage with flower spikes above.

Some of these alternatives are native to the southwest. ‘Regal Mist’, a cultivar of deer grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris* ‘Regal Mist’) is beautiful and easy to keep; its flowers create a lovely crimson haze around the plant. Alkali sacaton (*Sporobolus airoides*) is another clumping grass that will create an attractive mass of reddish seed heads floating above its foliage in the fall.

Whatever replacement you choose, it is important to replace green fountain grass, not only because of the law, but to be a good environmental citizen.

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