



Don't Plant This: Plant That - Part 2

by Sharon Plein, UC Master Gardener

In a recent article, we learned about the PlantRight Organization's current advisory against 7 invasive plants that threaten the natural diversity of our open areas. The lack of natural checks in our environment causes these invasive plants to spread and overtake existing native plants, creating threats of flooding, fire and crop losses as well as a lack of habitat for native species.

There are very interesting "back stories" to two of those listed plants: Water hyacinth and the Chinese tallow tree. These two amazing stories present examples of **how and why** a plant species became an ecological threat; and why we want to avoid using them, and plants like them, in our landscapes.

Water Hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*)

Can you imagine the wild African hippopotamus wandering the lakes and streams of North America? It almost happened because of the introduction of the water hyacinth at the 1884 World's Fair in New Orleans.

A group of visiting Japanese gave the water hyacinths away. The gifts were planted and soon began spreading throughout the waterways of Florida and Louisiana. This beautiful floating weed adapted too well to its new environment. With no natural checks on its growth, water hyacinth was choking the flow of water in rivers and waterways. Additionally, the plant's thick growth was killing fish by depleting the oxygen in the water. Louisiana was in crisis mode because it had two serious problems. The first problem was that officials were unable to eradicate the plant. The second problem was a serious meat shortage resulting from the fact that marshy bayous and swamps were unsuited for raising cattle.



Water Hyacinth

By 1910 a New Foods Society was formed to find a combined solution to both the meat crisis and water hyacinth problem. This group's plan was to import the hippopotamus from Africa. The hippos would eat the hyacinth and carnivorous residents would eat the hippos. Louisiana congressman Robert Broussard proposed HR 23621, the American Hippo Bill to promote the importation of hippos to Louisiana and Florida. The Agricultural Committee of the US House of Representatives considered the bill, but it failed to pass into law by a margin of a single vote.

Consequently, Louisiana and Florida were forced to find other means to control the invasive water hyacinth. Today, mechanical dredging or harvesting equipment, chemical herbicides, and a biological control in the form of an imported weevil do the work once proposed for the African hippopotamus.

Chinese Tallow Tree (*Triadica sebifera* or *Sapium sebiferum*)

Benjamin Franklin, one of our nation's founding fathers, is responsible for introducing the Chinese tallow tree to America. On a 1772 trip to China he wrote a letter to a friend praising the usefulness of the plant. The Chinese used this tree's waxy seed covering to make soap, candles, and oils. The tree was aesthetically pleasing with a graceful stature, beautiful fall foliage, useful white seed pods, and catkin flowers in spring that attracted bees. It was fast growing and seemed to be a desirable import. In his 1772 letter, Ben told his friend, "Tis a most useful plant."



Chinese Tallow Tree

When Ben brought the seeds to America, he had no way knowing that the tallow tree would take over woodlands, alter eco-systems and become so difficult to eradicate. The primary reason for its bad reputation is its tremendous reproduction potential. The Chinese tallow tree can produce 100,000 long-lived seeds per year. Root fragments, cuttings, and re-sprouting stumps easily reproduce new trees. These trees displace native species and contribute to animal habitat loss. The milky sap from this tree is toxic to animals, and its root system makes reforestation difficult.

Today, many volunteer groups in the southern US and Gulf Coast states comb the river ways and open fields with shovels and hatchets in an effort to eradicate the species.

The lesson to be learned from these two stories is that introducing a foreign species of plant material into an area where there are no insect or animal predators to control the plant's spread is a bad idea. We want to use plants that flourish in our gardens, but do not overwhelm our landscapes or escape into open fields and natural wildlands.

Avoid using invasive plants listed by the PlantRight Organization. Choose plants that stay where they are planted. For further information on invasive plants contact the PlantRight Organization at www.plantright.org.

For answers to all your home gardening questions, call Master Gardeners in Tulare County at (559) 684-3325, Tuesdays and Thursdays between 9:30 and 11:30 am; or Kings County at (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 am; or visit our website: <http://cetulare.ucanr.edu>.

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