



Ornamental Pampas and Jubata grasses: Be aware of their weedy nature

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Pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) and its close relative Jubata grass (*Cortaderia jubata*) are evergreen, ornamental perennial grasses that form large clumps (called tussocks) about 6-12 feet tall and wide. Silvery-green leaves arise like a fountain from the center and gently curve over forming very dense tufts. They become easily recognizable and distinguishable in early to midsummer, when even taller stiff stems appear bearing 1-2 foot showy plumes of shaggy, creamy white to purple, grass flowers. These panicles of flowers can persist into winter and hang on the plant for a year.

Unfortunately these massive grasses bearing graceful plumes have been categorized as invasive weedy pests in California. According to the California Invasive Plant Council (a consortium of botanists, weed scientists, and ornamental nursery personnel) “most of our garden plants stay put in our landscapes, but a few of them “jump the fence” when their seeds, roots, or stem pieces spread to other areas.” These highly aggressive plants spread easily and displace many native species, which in turn damages our diverse wildlife habitat. Some invasive plants clog our waterways such as the Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*), others like English ivy can damage buildings, trees, and fences, and still others pose more of a fire threat such as Scotch broom.

Although these two grasses are similar, there are slight, yet important differences in their characteristics. Jubata grass plumes are all alike; they are usually purple in color and each plume contains some viable seed; each plant is a mother plant. Pampas grass produces male and female plants and you cannot tell them apart until they form their plumes. Male plumes provide the pollen and female plumes must be pollinated to produce viable seed. So unlike jubata grass, pampas grass develops seed only when male and female plants are within pollination range of one another.

Each seed bearing plume produces thousands of seeds. Although weedy populations often arise near the mother plants, viable seed from either grass is easily spread by wind up to 20 miles away. If allowed to spread both jubata and pampas grass can colonize a large area making it virtually impenetrable because the tussocks are so dense and the leaf



Jubata grass plume



Pampas grass plumes: female (left) and male (right)

blade margins are sharp and easily cut through skin. Sites with bare, sandy soil are most favorable for seedling establishment. Colonization is typically less on shaded sites or where seedlings must compete with dense grasses or sedges. Individual plants are capable of surviving up to 15-20 years.

Jubata grass is native to the Andes Mountains in South America where the climate is similar to Northern California. Pampas grass is also native to the Andes Mountains as well as the lower elevation subtropical grasslands and riparian areas of Argentina, Uruguay, and southern Brazil.

Pampas grass was introduced to California about 1848 by Joseph Sexton, a nurseryman from Santa Barbara.

Historically, the plumes on female pampas grass plants were considered to be more attractive. So only the female plants were exclusively propagated by plant division within the nursery trade for ornamental purposes including use in floral arrangements. In more recent years, some nursery stock has been propagated by seed and as a consequence both sexes have been widely planted as landscape ornamentals. Consequently there is an increase in unwanted pampas grass populations. Ornamental nurseries are not entirely to blame. In 1946 pampas grass was planted by the Soil Conservation Service for livestock feed and erosion control.



Jubata grass infestation on the Coast

No one knows exactly when jubata grass was introduced to California. Regardless they have both escaped cultivation and become noxious weeds in some areas of California, especially along the coast. Jubata grass is currently more widespread than pampas grass, but there is grave concern that pampas grass may become even more invasive since it tolerates a wider range of climate variation.



Jubata grass infestation in Redwoods.

Hawaii also considers these grasses to be invasive and in Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand they are banned from sale and distribution. Pampas and jubata grass are seen in residential landscapes in the valley and foothills. If your property is in the country be aware of the weedy nature of these majestic grasses and prevent their spread into our natural and wild lands.

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