

What makes a plant invasive? And why should we be concerned?

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When plants that have evolved in one area of the world are introduced to another area, some of them outgrow and crowd out native vegetation that wildlife depends on for food and habitat. Some introduced plants have a competitive advantage because they are out of their native environment and their growth is no longer limited by natural predators. Many of these introduced plants are considered weeds and are agricultural pests, but many impact wild land areas as well. It is estimated that invasive plants cost \$82 million per year in control, monitoring, and outreach expenses in California alone.

Some of these plants were introduced with practical uses in mind. For instance, iceplant was installed along highway berms by Caltrans to prevent soil from washing onto the roadways. Pampas grass was planted on hillsides in Big Sur to retain the bluffs. Both of these attempts proved to be ineffective and both plants are now invasive and hard to eliminate.

Other plants brought in as landscape ornamentals, such as periwinkle (*Vinca major*) can run amuck because of rampant, seemingly unstoppable growth. Any part of it that touches water will put down roots and form a dense mat crowding out any plants in its way. Scotch broom, French broom and Portuguese broom, on the other hand, favor dry habitats and can wreak havoc in pastureland and increase the potential for wildfires. In farms and rangeland, brooms can crowd out crops and forage, thereby lowering land values. Since they are not palatable to livestock, grazing does not reduce their numbers. Giant reed (*Arundo donax*) threatens riparian ecosystems by outcompeting native plants, such as willows, for water.

What can the home gardener do to help? Practice responsible landscaping by learning more about invasive plants in your area and avoid planting them. Discourage your local nurseries from selling invasives.

Educate others about invasive plants. Volunteer with organizations that are involved in weed removal.

For more information on invasive plants and alternative plants for landscaping, visit the websites of the California Invasive Plant Council, [calipc.org](http://calipc.org), and PlantRight at [plantright.org](http://plantright.org).