

Lovely pest

Pampas grass an import that's worn out welcome

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STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — If this variety of pampas grass were a person, it would be a willowy blonde, seductive, with a stubborn streak. If it were a house guest, it would outstay its welcome, moving in permanently and bearing children.

Cortaderia jubata, a 10- to 15-foot weed topped by feathery plumes, wormed its way into the

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affections of landscapers for many years before public opinion turned against it. Now the prolific fronds are reviled for spreading their seed over acres of land and crowding out California's native plants.

"In (Santa Cruz County) it's taking over a lot of dune sites, displacing a lot of native vegetation," said Dr. Joe Di Tomaso, a weed specialist with the UC Cooperative Extension program in Davis. When jubata grass overpowers native plants, it also disrupts the natural habitats of native wildlife in the area, Di Tomaso said.

Because jubata produces millions of seeds and quickly develops deep root systems even in sandy soils, the "aggressive weed" often takes root wherever the soil has been exposed. "The seeds get blown all over the place and whenever they land on a bare spot, they grow," Di Tomaso said.

Clumps of the ubiquitous grass grow throughout Santa Cruz County, especially in South County along Highway 1 from Aptos to Watsonville. Although jubata is not as prevalent here as in Monterey, San Mateo and other counties, its propensity to spread has county officials on guard.

But it is a group of community members who have taken the lead in eradicating the pesky weed, at least in the county's state parks.

Aptos resident Ken Moore and the hundreds of people who have volunteered with his wildlife restoration team over the past four years have devoted their Saturdays to hacking at the roots of the jubata and other invasive plants.

Moore, who receives partial funding for his efforts from Sempervirens Fund, a land conservancy in the Santa Cruz Mountains, advocates hand removal of jubata as a long-term eradication strategy.

Although removing the plant by hand is labor intensive, volunteers who persevere are rewarded for their efforts, Moore said. "When they do get it out, they are really thrilled," he said.

But amassing enough volunteers to eradicate the proliferation of jubata in the county by hand would be difficult. That is why county officials have joined with the UC Cooperative Extension office in Watsonville to inform the public about jubata and the various ways to get rid of it.

About 60 community members attended a meeting last week about seed control, hand removal and the regulations that apply to treating jubata grass with herbicides.

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County officials are hoping that community members will launch a community-wide offensive against jubata, but so far no one has stepped forward to take charge of the effort, said Sonya Hammond, the county director of UC Cooperative Extension.

Jubata is the first cousin to a cultivated species of native South American pampas grass that was brought to Europe. Unlike the jubata, the cultivated ornamental species rarely produces seeds, Di Tomaso said.

When Europeans brought both plants to the United States at the turn of the century, landscapers did not realize they were planting the problem plant instead of its desirable look-alike until the jubata's exponential growth caused communities to take notice in the past 15 years, Di Tomaso said.

For further information on jubata grass or to get involved in eradication efforts, call 763-8040 or 454-2460.