



Hawaii Invasive Species Council

“Christmas Berry Humbug”

Weed Risk
Assessment

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An evergreen tree with clusters of hanging red berries and bright green foliage might seem a cheerful decoration during a festive holiday season. However, the Christmas berry, or Brazilian peppertree (*Schinus terebinthifolius*), is an unwelcome guest in the Islands.

Its fruiting branches are sometimes picked and used for making Christmas wreaths and holiday decorations. This is not recommended. Considered a weed, the Christmas berry's fruits are poisonous; their sap may produce a rash and the pollen may cause allergic reactions in some people.

The Christmas berry is now naturalized, or grows wild, in tropical and subtropical regions throughout the world. It thrives in disturbed natural areas, pastures, roadsides, forests and even conservation areas.

Introduced to the U.S. as an ornamental from South America in the mid-1800s, the popular Christmas berry escaped cultivation, its seeds dispersed by fruit-eating birds. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has identified this rapidly colonizing weed as one of the most significant non-indigenous threats to federal listed endangered and threatened native plants throughout the Hawaiian Islands.

In Hawaii, the Christmas berry is naturalized on Midway Atoll and in areas from sea level to approximately 2,300 feet throughout the main Hawaiian Islands, except for Niihau and Kahoolawe.



The Christmas berry is still used for making holiday wreaths. This aggressive invader colonizes areas in Southern California, Texas, Florida and Hawaii where it tolerates a variety of environmental conditions and prolifically produces seeds.

—photo by George Staples

Christmas berry forms dense stands of woody tangled stems that compete for water resources, crowd and shade out native vegetation, and threaten rare and endangered plants, such as the yellow hibiscus. Considered one of the most aggressive invasive species, even fire can't control this weed as it will quickly regrow from its base. Besides shading out other vegetation, this invasive species is believed to release substances into the soil that prevent other plants from reestablishing.

Today, more than 1,000 species of exotic plants are growing wild in Hawaii. The Hawaii/Pacific Weed Risk Assessment and the Hawaii Exotic Plant Evaluation Protocol, research collaborations between the University of Hawaii and the U.S. Forest Service, support efforts to conduct a science-based determination of introduced species likely to cause ecological and economic harm in Hawaii by becoming an invasive species. The HPWRA ranks the Christmas berry at 19; a score of seven or higher determines a high risk for invasiveness.



Call the Pest Hotline to report invasive pests.