

WEED OF THE WEEK

OCTOBER 8, 2008

A feature on KKCR's "Back to the Garden" radio program

Supplemental article provided by Jacqueline Kozak, Hawai'i Invasive Species Council

FEATURED SPECIES: MEXICAN CREEPER (*Antigonon leptopus*)

Two weeks ago, when we featured Hiptage as our weed of the week, Kamran, who is one of the hosts, asked if it is also known as Mexican creeper. Hiptage has many names in many languages (in other places that it invades), but "Hiptage" is the only one in English. Mexican creeper actually refers to another vine from a different family with the Latin name *Antigonon leptopus*, and as promised, will be our invader under investigation this week.

The Mexican creeper actually has several other English pseudonyms, such as coral bells, chain-of-love, mountain rose, and hearts-on-a-chain. Don't those sound nice? Unfortunately, it doesn't play very nicely with its neighbor plants, a classic misbehavior of weeds. Invasive vines have that uncanny ability to defy gravity and rise above surrounding vegetation, often out-competing native and other desirable plants for resources, and in the end, smothering them. This plant can be a real creep in your garden, and often escapes cultivation seeking out disturbed areas to take over.

In Guam and many other places in the Pacific, Australia, and the mainland, Mexican creeper has been recognized as an invasive species. It jumps the fence easily with seeds that are eaten, carried, and dropped off by birds and pigs. Plus, it can float in water, drifting down any of Kaua'i's many streams to take root elsewhere.

During the Kaua'i Invasive Species Committee's and the National Tropical Botanical Garden's roadside survey, Mexican creeper was actually found to be somewhat widespread in the lowlands, like so many weeds are, as they escape cultivation. Most of the time, we focus on weeds that will affect the native flora and fauna communities found in the uplands, and KISC specifically targets species that are in their incipient stage, a level of distribution that is manageable on an island-wide scale. But, not all hope is lost when it comes to widespread species. It will just take awareness and collective action to make a difference. Besides, there are two very important things that are taking place and growing in the lowlands that require us to pay attention to and care about the invasion of weeds like the Mexican creeper: agriculture and restoration.

As we try to cultivate home gardens and support family farms more and more on Kaua'i, we will see the challenge that these widespread weeds pose. I

always say that no one knows the hard work required in managing weeds more intimately than farmers. There will be enough obstacles to sustainability and food security without the added invasive species that have been brought in for ornamental use or accidentally in imported goods, especially produce. With extensive underground tubers to fully remove for effective control, the Mexican creeper would add a lot of unnecessary labor on the farm.

In terms of restoration, there are so many wonderful, ongoing restoration projects in the lowlands from Limahuli to Maha`ulepu to Māna. As these areas are trying to reclaim native species dominance and habitat, it is important that they are not continually flooded with weeds. We can do our part, as always, by choosing our gardens wisely and removing weeds from our piece of the Garden Isle, no matter how large or small. Every parcel of land needs a natural resource manager, and we all need to work together.

Our website has information that will help you to identify Mexican creeper on your property. Remember to pull it out from the root and remove the tuber completely so that it doesn't come back. As for choosing our gardens wisely, there is always the native alternative ...

NATIVE GARDEN ALTERNATIVE:

Sometimes it's hard to tell how certain invasive species got to Hawai'i. But, with its bright pink flowers, it's pretty easy to guess that the Mexican Creeper was brought in to bring some color to home gardens. But, we don't need to look across the Atlantic for such a thing! Our native `Uhi `Uhi also has gorgeous pink flowers arranged in a cluster. Unfortunately, this endemic species is now endangered, and so cultivating it in our gardens is a service to biodiversity. It's a rare find, but it will be one of the threatened and endangered species featured at DOFAW's Arbor Day plant sale on November 7. To learn more about `Uhi `Uhi, check out Rick Barboza's "In the Garden" article at <http://archives.starbulletin.com/2004/02/27/features/garden.html>

For more info on DOFAW's rare plant sale, call 274-3433.