

WEED OF THE WEEK
SEPTEMBER 24, 2008

FEATURED SPECIES: HIPTAGE (*Hiptage benghalensis*)

After people started reading about and seeing photos of the changes and damage that Australian Tree Fern was causing in some of our most precious natural areas on Kauaʻi, they began to remove the species from their gardens, sometimes replacing it with a native fern like Hapu`u or a non-invasive like a cycad. But, can we be more proactive in the future? Can we remove plants of high risk *before* they jump the fence? Is there justification before the fact of major impact and establishment of wide distribution to motivate us that an ornamental plant just isn't worth the risk of losing biodiversity? This week's featured weed, **Hiptage**, brings up these questions.

Although Hiptage has not yet been recorded as encroaching on native species dominated areas in Hawaiʻi, we have some relevant information about the species that leads us to question if it will stay put in cultivation and do no harm. Observations about its behavior (or misbehavior) in other areas of the world are enough to give pause. Here in Hawaiʻi, the topography and climate of our islands gives rise to a variety of ecosystems. It is troublesome when a species has the ability to invade both our lowland forests, like the Wiliwili populations still surviving in Kekaha, all the way up to our Ohi`a forests in Koke`e. In Reunion and Mauritius, islands found in the Indian Ocean that were also affected by the Eyrthrina Gall Wasp, Hiptage is considered very invasive in their dry, lowland forest areas and displaces native species. But, it has also been invasive in Australian rainforest areas, meaning that its invasion range is very broad, and therefore, could cover a lot of ground in our diverse ecosystems in Hawaiʻi. If we know that a species has caused harm in other parts of the world, which have similar environmental conditions found here, should we bring it in and take that chance?

And, that's not all we know about Hiptage. Its name is derived from the Greek word, "hiptamai," which means, "to fly." This descriptive moniker refers to the abilities of its fruit, which are equipped with three papery wings, known as "samara." With the help of the wind, these little helicopters can take the seeds far beyond the original site of cultivation, into dry lowlands and wet uplands alike. Should we plant something knowing that it will jump the fence and cause problems beyond our garden?

All of this information was enough for the Kauaʻi Landscaping Industry to say no. No, it is not worth it, even to an industry that could still make a profit selling it. Hiptage was one of the species on the "discontinue list" for Kauaʻi's Voluntary Codes of Conduct.

Fortunately, Hiptage is not at the point of invasion that Australian Tree Fern is here on Kaua'i. It gives us an opportunity to be more proactive this time around and make these important decisions before it is too late. Already, Hiptage has claimed about 500 acres on Kaua'i. We encourage landowners to take on the kuleana of controlling and removing weeds from their property, just like the many people who took out the Australian Tree Ferns in their gardens. Field crews and natural resource managers will continue to work on protecting our native ecosystems from invasive species, but we can all pitch in by making sure that our gardens aren't pumping more and more weed seeds into these areas. From Mauka to Makai, it is a group effort to take care of Kaua'i.

NATIVE GARDEN ALTERNATIVE: So, we want to keep Hiptage out of our gardens and out of the forest, but we still need pretty plants with fragrant flowers, right? With the highest rate of plant endemism in the world, we have a lot of unique native species to choose from in Hawai'i. Hiptage can grow as a shrub from sea level up to higher elevation mesic forest areas. Ulei, a native, can do the same, without causing damage to other native plants along the way. It smells so good, with blossoms and fruits even more showy than Hiptage. To learn more, check out Rick Barboza's "In the Garden" article at <http://archives.starbulletin.com/2008/08/15/features/garden.html>