

**WEED OF THE WEEK**  
**JULY 16 2008**

**FEATURED SPECIES: FOUNTAIN GRASS (*Pennisetum setaceum*)**

When the Kaua'i Invasive Species Committee teamed up with the Garden Island Arts Council to do an art and environmental education program in schools, the lesson was titled "The Art of Biodiversity." Through photographs and stories, the students saw the beauty of life's natural diversity, uniquely evolved on these isolated islands from the blank canvas of black lava rock. In a healthy, diverse ecosystem, the colors, shapes, and sizes of the flora and fauna are numerous, working together in a complex, interconnected relationship. Aesthetically, you can tell the immense difference between a biodiverse area and an area that has been taken over by an invasive species. We explained to the students that invasive species don't tend to share, especially without the checks and balances of their native home. And so, if you are walking through the forest, or looking at a hillside, or swimming by a reef, and you mainly see only one type of species growing everywhere, covering everything, then you know that the biodiversity of that ecosystem has been invaded. In the end, the students decided that their art project would be much more interesting with the full palette of biodiversity. And biodiversity doesn't just create a pretty planet; it creates a healthier planet contributing to our quality of life support systems like air quality, watersheds, and rainfall.

A good example of an invasive species that forms dense stands resulting in a monochromatic, monotypic landscape is Fountain Grass. Like many of our invasive species, it was introduced as an ornamental. But with seeds easily spread by wind, vehicles, hiking boots, and clothing, it didn't stay put. A native to Northern Africa, it aggressively dominates the ecosystem, changing it from a dry forest to a savannah, a habitat not very useful to Hawai'i's wildlife. It now covers over 200,000 acres on Big Island from barren lava flows to rangelands. When Fountain Grass colonizes the lava flows, it doesn't even give the native species a chance to take root in the blank canvas. Cattle don't like to eat it either, which means it degrades pastures.

On Kaua'i, we have had our share of brushfires and know how destructive they can be. Fountain Grass is known for its fire promoting characteristics, fueling the way for huge fires, like the one that claimed 8900 acres on Big Island in 2007. Over \$500,000 a year is spent on the Big Island trying to manage these fire risks and prevent Fountain Grass from threatening biodiversity hot spots.

Fountain Grass is found on Kaua'i in Kalaheo, Hanapepe, and the North Shore. Fountain Grass will really take off and take over in drier areas, which are also more fire prone, and so we are trying to prevent the spread. There are many different kinds of weedy grasses on Kaua'i. Many of us are familiar with species like Guinea Grass. Fountain Grass looks much different. It is a bunching, clumped grass with long, thin green leaves that grows 3-4ft. tall. Most likely it was introduced because of its showy plumes, which are pink-yellowish in color. Check out the website at [www.kauaiisc.org](http://www.kauaiisc.org) for more identifying photos and information.

If you think you have Fountain Grass in your yard or see it on Kaua'i, please call the pest hotline at 643-PEST (7378). We can help to identify and take care of it. Like Smokey the Bear says...we can prevent fires! And together, we can protect biodiversity, the lifeline of our planet.

**GARDEN ALTERNATIVE:** Looking for a nice grass to showpiece in your garden? Forget Fountain Grass (it's on the noxious weed list)! Try our native Pili Grass. Also bunching in similar size, Pili Grass is super easy to grow, requiring little water. Learn more about Pili Grass and other ways to plant an Indigenous Landscape on the website.

See Star Bulletin article "In the Garden" by Rick Barboza (9/21/2007) about growing pili grass: <http://starbulletin.com/2007/09/21/features/garden.html>