

BEST PRACTICES



Before You Buy That Plant: Is It a Noxious Weed?

Spring is in the air and local nurseries are stocked with plants to help beautify your landscapes. What you may not know is some of these plants are causing a substantial problem in Thurston County. Plants such as butterfly bush (*Buddleja davidii*), common fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) and pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) are often sold at local nurseries even though butterfly bush and common fennel are listed on the Washington State Noxious Weed List and pampas grass is proposed to be listed. These ornamental plants are non-native plants that grow quite well here in Thurston County. So well, that they often displace native plants once they “escape” from areas where they were intentionally planted. Noxious weeds such as these can threaten the native environment and wildlife that depend on native plants. Butterfly bush is often planted because of its beautiful and numerous flowers, which attract butterflies. Unfortunately, it is quite adept at establishing itself along disturbed areas, creeks and river banks where it outcompetes our native willows. Native willow on the Nisqually River is being crowded out by the invasive butterfly bush. While butterfly bush does provide nectar for adult butterflies, Western tiger swallowtail larvae and caterpillars prefer native willows for food and habitat. Thus, the Western tiger swallowtail will not lay its eggs on butterfly bush.

A native plant substitute for butterfly bush is red elderberry (*Sambucus racemosa*), which produces flower clusters that attract nectaring butterflies. Unlike the invasive butterfly bush, it is used by the larval forms of native butterflies. Plus, cedar waxwing birds like its bright red berries! If you already have butterfly bush, and you do not wish to remove it, then it is very important to cut the flower clusters after they bloom so the millions of lightweight seeds cannot disperse. (A mature plant can produce up to 3 million seeds!) Bag the cuttings and place in the trash. Make sure to bag any branches you cut or that are broken as they can also take root!

Common fennel, which has a strong licorice scent, also produces a large number of seeds per plant and can reproduce from pieces of its root crown. Once it establishes itself, it tends to dominate a site, effectively excluding other vegetation. A good alternative to common fennel is bulbous fennel (*F. vulgare* var. *azoricum*), also known as Florence fennel.

To control common fennel, clip and bag seed heads before cutting

Noxious Weeds

Non-native plants that aggressively spread and occupy land at the expense of native plants, which cause damage to agricultural land, natural ecosystems, recreation and animal health.

Noxious: Butterfly Bush



Large, semi-deciduous shrub. Grows up to 10 feet tall. Small, fragrant, funnel shaped flowers borne in showy spikes at ends of stem; usually purple, but also white, pink, blue, orange and yellow.

Native Alternative: Red Elderberry



or digging up the plant. Place bagged seed heads in trash. You can pull or dig up small seedlings. Mature fennel plants have a long taproot and are more difficult to dig out. If the taproot should break, make sure to remove the top 3 – 6” of the root to prevent rerooting. Fennel seeds remain viable in soil for many years, so make sure to monitor for new growth and pull up any new seedlings. It’s also a good idea to replant areas where fennel is removed to prevent it from reestablishing.

Pampas grass is highly invasive. It can tolerate a wide range of temperature and habitats. It also produces a prolific amount of seeds per plant (100,000 per flower clump) and easily outcompetes native vegetation and forestry seedlings. Pampas grass also poses a fire hazard, as it produces an excessive layer of dried leaves and flower stalks.

Report any escaped Pampas grass plants to Thurston County Noxious Weeds. Hand pull or dig small plants. For larger plants, cut flowering tips before digging out roots. Carefully bag the flowering tips and place in the trash. A good alternative to Pampas grass is native bear grass (*Xerophyllum tenax*).

The Thurston County Noxious Weed Control Board has recommended that butterfly bush, common fennel and Pampas grass be quarantined, which would mean that these plants could no longer be sold at area nurseries. In the meantime, there are native and non-invasive plant alternatives to these and other noxious weeds, which you could use to beautify your yard and benefit local wildlife.

For additional suggestions on alternative non-invasive plants, go to: <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/tcweeds/docs/garden-wise-non-invasive-plants-for-your-garden.pdf>.

Source: Stream Team News, Spring 2014

Noxious: Common Fennel (left)
Native Alternative: Bulbing Fennel (right)



Large perennial herb that grows 4 – 10 feet tall. Yellow flower clusters are flat topped and umbrella shaped. Strong licorice scent.

Noxious: Pampas Grass (left)
Native Alternative: Bear Grass (right)



Fast growing perennial grass. Forms a large clump of long, narrow leaves. Grows up to 7 feet tall. Stems have huge, feathery flower plumes that grow taller than the bluish gray-green leaves. Flowers are light violet to silvery white.