

# March 2021 Gardener's Corner

By Cate White, SJ county Master Gardener

March is an excellent month for planting, so you will find gardeners flocking to plant nurseries in search of new plants for their gardens. There are many things to keep in mind when buying a new plant; such as the type of soil the plant requires, its light needs, water requirements, tolerance to windy conditions, and the potential size of the mature plant. You may be looking for a plant to provide color at certain times of the year, or an evergreen plant that grows or can be trimmed into a pleasing shape. Or you may be looking for the sort of movement and texture provided by grass-like specimens. One aspect of this plant search, however, may not be top of mind: is it an invasive species that's best to avoid planting at all?

So, what is an invasive species? It can be defined as a plant that is a non-native with few factors in its new environment that would limit its growth, so that once it is introduced it will aggressively take over causing environmental and economic harm.

A California organization called PlantRight maintains a list of the top offenders in our area, including Pampas Grass, Green Fountain Grass, Mexican Feather Grass, Highway Iceplant, Periwinkle, Yellow Flag Iris and Water Hyacinth. Using a couple of common varieties as examples illustrates why it is important to avoid these plants.

First on the list is Mexican Feather Grass, or *stipa tenuissima*. This is an attractive grass 2 to 2½ feet tall with narrow free-flowing leaves that wave gracefully in the wind. It has feathery greenish blooms in the spring that remain on the plant through fall, turning golden as they age. Unfortunately, it also produces a huge number of seeds, which are easily spread by wind, water or animals. These seeds grow readily in wild grassland areas adding to fire danger. Even worse, fire contributes to additional seed sprouting. These plants have been very popular with landscapers in recent years. Five years ago, we had our yard redone and our landscaper planted several of them. A year or so later, I learned that they were on the invasive plant list so I removed them, but I have been pulling out seedlings all over my yard ever since, so I know firsthand how easily these plants can spread. PlantRight recommends Pine Muhly grass as an alternative.



**Mexican Feather Grass**  
*Plantright.org*



**Pine Muhly**  
*Plantright.org*

Next up is *Vinca major*, or periwinkle. This plant makes an attractive ground cover bearing inch-wide blue flowers. However, it is considered invasive since it spreads easily from small pieces of the stem, which easily take root, especially in damp areas such as riverbanks. Plants are easily started from cuttings that are not disposed of properly. Small pieces that break off near flowing water can be carried downstream to start new plants. They produce rampant growth, crowding out native vegetation depriving wild life of native plant foods. The plants can be toxic, and can also harbor Pierce's disease, which is fatal to grapevines. PlantRight recommends star jasmine, Serbian Bellflower (*campanula pocharskyana*), or hardy geranium as alternatives. Two cultivars; *vinca major* "Variegata", and *vinca major* "Maculata" can be found in nurseries and are not considered invasive.



**Vinca major**  
*Plantright.org*



**Siberian Bellflower**  
*Plantright.org*



**Hardy Geranium**  
*Plantright.org*

These are just two examples of what can be found on the PlantRight web site. I urge you to go to [plantright.org](http://plantright.org) for information on more invasive plants and their alternatives. PlantRight works with nurseries in California encouraging them not to carry invasive plants. You may recall that several years ago, there was a problem with Scotch broom (and other broom varieties) that colonize on wild hillsides. PlantRight considers this a success story, since nurseries no longer offer them for sale, and has now removed them from their Don't Plant List. In fact, PlantRight is currently looking for volunteers to help with their annual spring nursery survey, taking place from March 8<sup>th</sup> to June 30<sup>th</sup>. Just go to their website and click on "Our Approach" to see how to sign up.

### **March Garden Checklist**

- Early March is still time to plant lettuce, parsley and chard seedlings. Flowering Spring annuals, such as pansies, sweet peas and ranunculus can also be planted now. Peas, carrots, beets and radishes can be planted from seed.
- Plant summer bulbs such as gladiolas and dahlias
- Most plants, including lawns, will appreciate an application of an all purpose fertilizer now
- Continue to control ants, slugs and snails, and adjust watering according to rainfall
- Cultivate or pull weeds