

Reported By Arizona Republic News

6 major invasive plants that can strangle and burn our deserts

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- **Buffel grass** - Cultivated for grazing in Texas and Mexico, but research indicates it loses nutritional value over time. Extremely flammable, burns at high temperatures, poses major risk to desert and property. Outcompetes native plants for water. Highly allergenic.
- **Fountain grass** - Decorative landscape plant that becomes aggressive in wild. Forms massive clumps, especially along washes, that burn readily. Has fueled fires in Phoenix's South Mountain Park. Outcompetes common native plants, like brittlebush.
- **Malta star thistle** - Develops dense, impenetrable stands. Poisonous to horses. Reduces soil stability. Makes recreational areas unusable.
- **Red brome** - Displaces native annual plants by germinating earlier, with less moisture. Virtually useless as forage grass. Dries into straw-like masses that fuel severe fires. Comes back quickly after fire. Dense stands produce 83,600 seeds per square meter.
- **Sahara mustard** - Probably introduced with date palms brought to California from Middle East in early 1900s. Forms massive stands after rainy winters. Can literally smother native plants. Breaks off into tumbleweeds, spreading thousands of seeds.
- **Salt cedar** - Gray-green deciduous trees and large shrubs introduced as ornamental from Asia in 1800s. Has taken over riparian areas throughout the West. Accumulates salt in its tissues and releases it into soil. Depletes groundwater through rapid rate of using water.

Sources: Arizona Cooperative Extension; California Invasive Plant Council; Global Invasive Species Database; InvasiveSpecies.gov; Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan; U.S. Department of Agriculture; University of Arizona; University of California. Photos by John M. Randall/The Nature Conservancy; red brome photo by Barry A. Rice/The Nature Conservancy

How you can help

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One whack at a time, volunteers are fighting off the non-native grass that's invading Tucson Mountain Park.

And what a difference they're making.

Since 2002, when they started keeping tabs, the Sonoran Desert Weedwackers have removed more than 1,600 bags of buffel grass and fountain grass. Placed end to end, the bags would reach over a mile.

We can't stop weeds from conquering large parts of Arizona's distinctive landscape without help from average people. Here's what you can do:

• **Volunteer.**

The Sonoran Desert Weedwackers, founded by Barb Skye Siegel in 2000, has achieved its successes through careful organization and small but crucial support from Pima County.

Doug Siegel, her husband, scouts out infestations ahead of time. Once a month, always the third Saturday, the Weedwackers spend two to three hours on the attack.

Doug, a trade technician for Pima County, uses 10 to 15 hours a month of work time to coordinate and lead the effort. The county supplies tools and vans for transportation.

Arizona has lots of concerned citizens. They turn out as individuals to go after invasive plants. They join special one-day blitzes organized by groups like the Sierra Club.

Conservation groups and local officials should be rushing to harness that dedication by establishing more Weedwackers throughout the state.

• **Keep your own property clear.**

Notice how that pretty fountain grass is spreading to other parts of your yard? It does the same thing when it gets into the wild - where it becomes fuel for wildfires. Homeowners should avoid decorative plants that can wreak havoc with the environment. They should keep an eye out for noxious weeds and immediately eradicate them.

And to spread the word, we need a strong education program about invasive plants.

- **Be careful in the wild.**

Hikers, bikers, horseback riders and off-road vehicles can pick up seeds from invasive plants and carry them to previously unaffected areas. Before taking a bike or vehicle onto public land, make sure it's clean of weed seeds. Avoid weedy areas. When leaving an area, check your clothing and equipment for seeds that might have grabbed hold.

National forests in Arizona and New Mexico are adopting a requirement that all hay brought onto their land must be certified weed-free. But equestrians need to cooperate by feeding their animals weed-free hay for at least 48 hours before entering the forest. To put a new twist on Smokey Bear's slogan: You can prevent weed attacks.