

Invasive Plant Spotlight: *Nassella tenuissima* (Mexican feathergrass)

Have you seen this deceptively beautiful plant in your neighborhood, someone's yard, a parking lot, or running along a sidewalk? It seems like a great drought tolerant plant...

So what's the problem?

Nassella tenuissima, also known as Mexican feathergrass, and formerly known as *Stipa tenuissima*, is an **emerging invasive plant** in California. An invasive plant is an introduced species that out-competes native plants and wildlife for space and resources, causing harm — and is often difficult to remove or control.

N. tenuissima produces thousands of seeds, which are dispersed by wind, water, contaminated soil, automobiles and animal droppings. The seed bank can persist for four years, and since the

plant commonly self sows it will likely spread out of its

designated place in the garden. In addition to being a landscaping headache, *N. tenuissima* is an extremely vigorous plant. In Australia and New Zealand, it forms pure, dense stands, preventing native plants from establishing. This plant can crowd out pasture species as well as native grasses in coastal areas. With a high fiber content and low nutritional value, it is unpalatable to cattle and forms indigestible balls in the stomach of livestock.



Photo credit: Susan Morrison/The Designer



Invaded hillside in New Zealand, Photo credit: NZGovt.

Why is it not on the California Invasive Plant Council (Cal-IPC) Inventory?

To be on the Cal-IPC Inventory, a plant must *already* cause ecological or economic harm in California. Because *N. tenuissima* is an emerging invasive species, it is just starting to show signs of being invasive and spreading into natural areas. There is not currently enough evidence that this grass has invaded wildlands to merit inclusion on the Cal-IPC Inventory. However, based on the results of a 95% accurate plant risk assessment tool (PRE tool developed at University of Washington and University of California at Davis, to predict invasive risk in ornamental plants on a regional basis), *N. tenuissima* was deemed to pose a high invasive risk in a majority of our state's climate zones. Being PRE-rated as "high risk" is a key criteria for addition to PlantRight's list of priority invasive plants.

Stopping the sale of this plant before it escapes onto our wild lands and open spaces saves taxpayer money on costly removal efforts, while protecting our natural areas and native species.



Photo credit: Stephanie Falzone

Fortunately, there are many beautiful, hardy, non-invasive alternatives to choose instead of this invasive plant. A few of these alternatives are described in detail on the next page.

Sources:

Anderson, F (2006); European and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organization; High Country Gardens www.highcountrygardens.com; Learn 2 Grow Gardening Guides; Milton, S. J. (2004); Moretto & Distel (1998); Pacific Island Ecosystems at Risk (PIER); PlantRight www.plantright.org; San Marcos Growers www.smgrowers.com; Sydney Weeds Committees; Weedbusters.

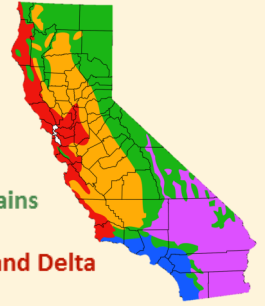


Suggested Alternatives

Ask a landscape or nursery professional about other non-invasive grasses

Climate zones

- **South Coast**
(Sunset Zones 18-24)
- **Desert**
(Sunset Zones 10-13)
- **Central Valley**
(Sunset Zones 7-9)
- **Sierra & Coastal Mountains**
(Sunset Zones 1-3)
- **North & Central Coast and Delta**
(Sunset Zones 14-17)



Guide to Plant Care Symbols



Full Sun Partial Sun Low Water Drought Tolerant CA Native



Bouteloua gracilis 'Blonde Ambition' | Blue grama grass



Suitable Climates



A long-lived, warm season grass that grows to the same size as *Nassella tenuissima*. Drought tolerant, has attractive flower heads, can be planted en masse, and is cold hardy. Grows in a wide range of soil types and is terrific for low maintenance landscapes. For best aesthetic in the spring, cut back in the winter.

Sporobolus airoides | Alkali sacaton



Suitable Climates



Alkali sacaton is a graceful, fine-textured, clumping grass that is both tough and good-looking. It is deep-rooted and drought-tolerant. This species is excellent for massing in hot, dry areas and can tolerate a wide range of soil conditions. A robust warm-season grass that flowers for many months, beginning in June. Can provide wildlife habitat and is often used by animals for forage, cover and nesting. Its seeds are relished by birds.



Muhlenbergia dubia | Mexican deer grass



Suitable Climates



A great-looking grass that is similar in appearance but about half the size of the more commonly used California deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*). A good choice for mass planting, smaller gardens, and containers. Rarely browsed by deer. Little supplemental irrigation is required, but it can handle more regular irrigation if soil drains well. Blooms in mid-summer with flower spikes about 3 feet tall.

Muhlenbergia capillaris 'White Cloud' | White awn muhly



Suitable Climates



A medium-sized grass forming a clump of narrow blue-green foliage 2 to 3 feet tall. In fall, flower stems rise another foot or higher above the foliage, holding an airy mass of delicate ivory-white flowers. A warm-season grass, it thrives in heat and humidity. A little larger and stiffer with a more upright habit than the familiar pink muhly (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*); it also blooms a little later.



Sesleria autumnalis | Autumn moor grass



Suitable Climates



A cool season, clump-forming ornamental grass which typically grows 8-12" tall. Narrow flower spikes rise above the foliage clump in summer, bringing its height to 18" tall. In autumn, flowers give way to silvery-white inflorescences that move gracefully in the wind. Attractive, narrow, yellow-green foliage (to 3/16" wide). Frost hardy. Does not reseed in the garden. Mass under trees or in full sun as a ground cover. Great for a natural meadow look.

Photo credit: Tony Spencer