



# Gardennote

## How to be a weed-aware gardener

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*Garden rubbish usually contains seeds, runners and other plant parts that may establish and give rise to weeds.*

Most gardeners probably think they are already weed-aware because of the effort they put into removing weeds from their lawns and flower beds. But many of the ornamental plants that gardeners look after in their gardens can become weeds if they escape – or are dumped - beyond the garden fence. When this happens, these garden escapes can displace and endanger the local plant species, and reduce the natural sources of food and shelter upon which native animals depend.

If you have a much loved plant in your garden and discover that it is a threat to the environment or agriculture, in many cases there is no need to remove it, because there are often simple ways to prevent it reaching the bush or valuable farmland.

On the other hand, some plants that are invasive in the wild also behave badly in the backyard, creating a problem for the gardener. Learning that the plant which is taking over your garden is also an environmental or agricultural weed could be just the trigger you need to get rid of the menace.

### Means of escape

Some garden plants can travel far. Birds eat the fleshy fruits and expel the seeds in their droppings at some distance. Rats, too, will carry away fruits such as olives, which have become weedy in parts of the southwest. Berries, seeds, bulbs or corms, and stem or root fragments drop into watercourses which transport them to lakes and swamps. Some seeds are wind-borne. One

### Important disclaimer

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plume of pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) may produce 100,000 seeds which can be blown up to 30 kilometres and give rise to large, dense stands of tussocks with razor-sharp leaves, such as along the upper Swan Valley.

As well as natural dispersal, human activities contribute greatly to spreading invasive plants. Pruned shoots might fall off a trailer carrying them to the tip and take root on the roadside. Aquatic plants dumped in a drain are easily washed into waterways where they proliferate, cover the water surface, starve the fish of oxygen and prevent recreational water sports. And the deliberate dumping of garden waste is a major source of weeds and habitat degradation.

### Off with their heads

The scale of invasion can be devastating. Arum lily (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*) covers thousands of hectares of forest and wetlands from Geraldton to the south coast of WA, forming monocultures that ruin wildlife habitat. When it invades pasture it can poison livestock.

The many people who love the arum lily's elegant flowers can continue to admire them in their home garden without worrying about contaminating surrounding bushland. They can do this by snipping off each bloom as soon as it wilts and binning or composting it so that the berries cannot form.

The sale of plants of arum lily is banned, although it is not illegal to have it in the garden.

A number of invasive plants have now been withdrawn from the nursery trade, but others remain staples at the garden centre. It would be hard to find many home gardens without agapanthus (*Agapanthus praecox*) which is also widely used in amenity horticulture. Yet, as our photograph shows, agapanthus is invading the bush in south-western WA. Again, dead-heading before the seeds develop is the way to enjoy the



Agapanthus plants in the Porongurups.

beautiful blue or white agapanthus flowers without letting the plant go feral.

### How to choose wisely

When looking for new plants for your garden, visit a reputable garden centre or nursery, and don't hesitate to ask the staff about the potential weediness of the plants you are considering buying.

And don't be tempted to buy seeds, plants or bulbs from the Internet or mail order catalogues, unless from a reputable supplier. Even some plants sold in the eastern States might not be allowed entry into WA. Check with Quarantine WA (telephone 9334 1800) for details and make sure you have the full botanical name (genus and species) of the plant, because common names vary and some are applied to several plants which are not even in the same genus.

### Changes in garden design

In the past 10 years the garden scene has altered, particularly in suburban Perth and other major urban centres, with the amount of garden space substantially reduced. Older blocks are cleared and subdivided with very little land for gardening. In new developments part of the sales package often includes landscaping.

Most landscape designers now use a mix of plants with low invasiveness, after learning lessons from poor choices of plants in the past. For example, 20 years ago the "mop-top" form of robinia (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) enjoyed brief popularity until landscapers realised this tree has a strong tendency to sucker, not only where it was planted but also the neighbours' gardens.

Well-established gardens often contain a surprising number of potentially weedy plants, which well-meaning but ill-informed people can spread throughout the community. If a neighbour



Bridal creeper (*Asparagus asparagoides*), which is a serious bushland weed in the south-west was originally cultivated in gardens.



*Ground asparagus (Asparagus aethiopicus)*



*How not to dispose garden-rubbish: as well as breaking the law, this action could create weed problems along the road verge.*



*Fishbone fern (Nephrolepis cordifolia)*

offers you cuttings of a climber or creeper and says it will cover your fence in no time, beware! That plant might be able to take over the entire garden. Climbers and creepers are among the most destructive weeds in the bush as they can smother ground vegetation and topple the native trees by their sheer weight.

Other sources of invasive garden plants are car-boot sales and weekend markets, as well as sales at school fetes and fund-raising events. The kindly people who donate are likely to pot up plants that have multiplied rapidly in their own gardens.

Ground asparagus (*Asparagus aethiopicus*) and fishbone fern (*Nephrolepis cordifolia*) are the sort of plants that often turn up at charity events and people buy them because the money is

for a good cause. They might later regret their generosity when these plants run out of control in their gardens and become hard to eradicate.

Even sensible gardening practices can accidentally move weeds around. We are all urged to spread mulch on our garden beds to save water. Mulch and woodchips sometimes contain seeds, especially if derived from mulched street tree prunings (available from many councils) so look out for any odd seedlings that may appear from the mulch and remove them before they turn into a nuisance. Cape lilac (*Melia azadarach*) is often spread this way.

If you are setting up a garden from scratch it is vital to learn which plants are invasive. By



*Arum lily (Zantedeschia aethiopicica) has become a dominant weed in wetter areas of the southwest of the State.*



*Hydrocotyl (Hydrocotyle ranunculoides) is capable of invading waterways.*

avoiding them you will do yourself and the environment a true favour.

### Safe disposal of unwanted plants

- Garden rubbish should never be dumped. Much of it contains seeds, bulbs, corms, runners and other plant parts capable of regenerating. In drier areas, succulent plants from garden waste will survive and multiply.
- When taking a trailer of garden rubbish to the tip, cover the top with a tarpaulin and tie securely at each corner to contain everything as you drive.
- During green waste street collections many people scavenge off others' front verges, so be careful what you put out. If you have thinned out agapanthus, for example, the next person who picks it up may not be responsible about dead-heading, so it might be wiser to bin that particular plant.
- If you are decommissioning a pond or getting rid of an aquarium, either put the aquatic plants on the compost heap or bin them in sealed plastic bags, instead of discarding them in the local creek or river.

When composting garden waste, avoid adding anything with seed-heads, or place the seed heads in a black plastic bag and leave in the



*Remove seed heads from plant material used in composting. Garden rubbish usually contains seeds, runners and other plant parts that may establish and give rise to weeds.*

sun for two months to kill the seeds before composting

If you see someone dumping garden waste in the bush, make a note of their vehicle registration if possible and report it to the local council or telephone the Keep Australia Beautiful Council's illegal dumping hotline 1300 766 541.

### Specimen identification requirements

When sending or delivering samples, the following information is required:

- Collector's name, location (where the specimen was found), full address, telephone number and e-mail address, description of the damage and date collected.

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