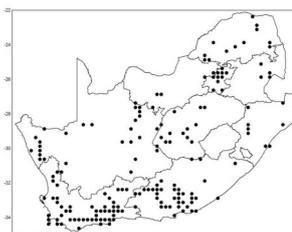


# ARC-PPRI FACT SHEETS ON INVASIVE ALIEN PLANTS AND THEIR CONTROL IN SOUTH AFRICA

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**FOUNTAIN GRASS** (*Pennisetum setaceum*) is a popular ornamental grass native to North Africa. Owing to its attractive inflorescences (i), it is popular in South African gardens, but has also been used for sand binding in certain parts of the country. The grass forms perennial tussocks 60-100 cm high and, from November to July, these bear cylindrical inflorescences. These may be light pink or purple (ii), and up to 25 cm long. Each inflorescence has long bristles, around 2 cm long, which eventually detach from the plant with the spikelets. Only the inner bristles are feathery. The leaves are up to 40 cm long and 3 mm wide. Fountain grass has escaped cultivation to become invasive and is a declared invader throughout South Africa, where it must be controlled, or eradicated where possible. Sterile hybrids of this plant may be available - ask your local nurseryman.



## THE PROBLEM

Out of its native range, fountain grass is adapted to a variety of habitats and environmental conditions. It is tolerant of both high and low elevations, and is well adapted to fire. In fact, infestations may become even more dense following fire. Also, dense infestations of fountain grass are known to increase the intensity and spread of fire. This poses a threat to indigenous plant species that are not adapted to such conditions, as well as to ground-nesting birds, and other animals. Fountain grass is not tolerant of high rainfall and, at this stage, appears to be restricted to the drier regions of South Africa, where it is becoming a common sight along railway lines (iii) and roadsides (iv), as well as in grasslands, urban areas, and on rocky hillsides. Plants are able to reproduce vegetatively and by seed. The seeds are easily dispersed by wind, birds, animals, water, humans, livestock, and vehicles, and remain viable in the soil for several years. Except for the very young shoots, fountain grass is generally not palatable to livestock, but may be eaten by goats.



## THE SOLUTION

Although no herbicide has been registered for use on fountain grass and foliar herbicides appear to be ineffective, infestations may respond to a systemic herbicide. Plants may also be controlled mechanically by uprooting them or destroying them with a weed eater. However, since the seed germinates readily, inflorescences should first be removed using gloves to prevent skin irritations, and then destroyed to prevent further spread. As with most invasive plants, the most sustainable method of control is biological control but, as yet, no agents have been identified for this purpose. In the meantime, a combination of chemical and mechanical control is recommended for large infestations, and gardeners are urgently requested to remove and destroy any garden specimens. These can be replaced with indigenous grass-like plants, such as *Chlorophytum* species (hen and chickens), which are hardy and drought-resistant, and available in various forms.



## environmental affairs

Department:  
Environmental Affairs  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA