

**CAT'S CLAW CREEPER** (formerly *Macfadyena unguis-cati* A.H.Gentry) is a fast-growing, perennial vine which was introduced into South Africa as an ornamental. Attractive yellow flowers (i), combined with its ability to create a screen and to cover walls, made it a favourite in suburban gardens. Each leaf comprises two leaflets and a terminal, three-forked tendril resembling a cat's claw (ii), hence the name. A hardened hook on each tendril enables the plant to clamber on walls, tree trunks, and virtually any other substrate. The vine is originally native to Central and tropical South America and the West Indies, but has been spread via the horticultural trade to every continent except Antarctica. It has become invasive in a number of countries, including South Africa. Cat's claw creeper is a category 1 declared weed in South Africa and must be controlled, or eradicated.



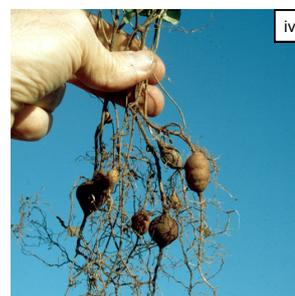
**THE PROBLEM**

Throughout its introduced range, this structural parasite has become invasive in forests, riparian habitats, and open urban spaces where its woody, climbing stems enable it to sprawl over other vegetation or structures in pursuit of light (iii). The vine is particularly damaging in forested areas where thickets of vegetation can develop in the canopy which, through shading and sheer mass, break branches and can eventually kill trees. Invasion is not restricted to the forest canopy however, as the plant is able to grow along the ground, forming a dense groundcover which smothers indigenous vegetation, and prevents germination of native species. In South Africa, cat's claw creeper has formed dense infestations in the Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West, and KwaZulu-Natal provinces. Owing to the fact that it is frost tolerant, and able to grow in all but the driest regions, cat's claw creeper has the potential to become denser in most parts of the country, especially the sub-tropical and south-eastern coastal areas where it poses a serious threat to both indigenous and commercial forests.



**THE SOLUTION**

Owing to the plant's profuse seed production, as well as its network of underground tubers (iv), chemical and mechanical control are difficult and usually ineffective. The membranous seeds are easily spread by wind and water, but it is the tubers which ultimately hamper control. When aerial parts of the plant are damaged by fire or chemicals, or removed mechanically, the plant re-sprouts readily from the tubers. Tubers, therefore, allow the plant to survive adverse conditions, and any control strategy must primarily target the tuber bank, but also remove the vines to prevent further spread and seed production. Owing to the creeper's sprawling habit, as well as the fact that it is inclined to invade ecologically sensitive or economically important ecosystems, any management effort is inevitably hampered by the risk of non-target effects. As a result, weed management practitioners have prioritised biological control as the only practical and long-term solution to infestations of cat's claw creeper.



**environmental affairs**

Department:  
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