

Fountain grass an example of why vigilance is needed

Kia'i Moku

By Joylynn Paman



Pounding the pavement in search of cryptic pests, the field crew

from Maui Invasive Species Committee (MISC) often makes unexpected discoveries. During a recent survey for ivy gourd in Kīhei, the crew knocked on the front door of a property known to have been plagued with the vine in the past.

“Sure you can search for ivy gourd,” said the resident, an avid gardener, “but first come look at my native grasses.”

He was excited to show off his new collection of grasses that he personally gathered on a recent trip to the Island of Hawai'i. Heading into the backyard, the crew immediately recognized the half dozen young plantings nestled in fresh soil. Rather than native grass, the unsuspecting landowner had collected fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*), an invasive species that's sweeping the Big Island.

Native to Africa, fountain grass is a large clumping grass that grows up to a meter tall with long purple to rose-colored inflorescences. Originally introduced as an ornamental plant, fountain grass has become an aggressive, habitat-altering invader. Seeds are spread by contaminated equipment and vehicles, humans, and the wind. The worst infestation occurs on the Big Island, where the weed covers nearly 200,000 acres.

The gardener described how he had seen the grass growing all along the lava fields and roadsides on the neighboring island. Mistaking it for a native, he thought it would make a

A poor pasture grass, fountain grass (in the foreground) degrades the quality of ranchlands, particularly those in drier areas. Even worse, fountain grass is fire-adapted, meaning it can fuel and sustain fires that spread quickly into adjacent areas.

nice addition to his garden. The crew understood but explained that fountain grass is one of the worst pest species in the islands—as is evident by its dramatic ability to take over thousands of wild acres.

A poor pasture grass, it degrades the quality of ranchlands, particularly those in drier areas. Resource managers on the Island of Hawai'i spend in excess of \$500,000 per year controlling the invasive grass.

Even worse, fountain grass is fire-adapted, meaning it can fuel and sustain fires that spread quickly into adjacent areas. It creates large volumes of dead dry biomass that burns rapidly with high intensity. After such a fire, fountain grass quickly colonizes barren areas, outcompeting natives. In August 2005, residents of Waikoloa were forced to evacuate during a 25,000 acre wildfire fueled by fountain grass.

Today, we are fortunate that fountain grass is not widespread here on Maui. MISC has aggressively controlled small fountain grass populations found near Kahakuloa, Wai'ehu, and Kula.

In Wailuku, MISC controlled repeated outbreaks of fountain grass over several years until the site was bulldozed for a new subdivision. Later, the wily weed sprouted up along Mokulele



Highway—likely delivered by the constant traffic of construction vehicles.

On Lāna'i, MISC has been controlling fountain grass at a golf course and near Kānepu'u.

We can't rest easy just yet. Time and time again plants are reintroduced into Maui Nui with the potential to invade barren areas from sea level to the top of Haleakalā. Dry lands and lava fields around the island could be quickly consumed by the fast growing weed.

During the dry season, the presence of fountain grass would heighten the risk level of fires. Within the last year, Kahikinui and Mā'alaea have experienced devastating fires which covered hundreds of acres containing precious native species. Fountain grass, if allowed to spread, could continue the inferno cycle and threaten our homes and environment.

At the Kīhei home, MISC crew removed the immature plants and now routinely checks the property for both



Fountain grass grows up to a meter tall with long purple to rose-colored inflorescences.

ivy gourd and fountain grass.

You can help prevent the establishment and spread of fountain grass within Maui Nui. Do not import grasses without confirming type and potential invasiveness—even if they look native or are abundant on other islands! Do not purchase grass seed mixtures that contain unknown types of grass.

Before entering a native environment, remove mud, dirt and brush off seeds from your boots and gear. If you find fountain grass on your property, notify the Maui

• “Kia'i Moku” (or “Guarding the Island”) is prepared by the Maui Invasive Species Committee to provide information on protecting the island from invasive plants and animals that can threaten the island's environment, economy and quality of life. Joylynn Paman, is public relations and education specialist with the MISC.