

Local battles exotic grass

by Jacoba Charles

Fifteen years ago, Molly Boyes noticed a lush green meadow under a dense bishop pine forest on the Inverness Ridge. She had never seen a familiar landscape change so drastically, or with such an unnatural result.

The grass, she learned later, was Ehrharta—or panic veldtgrass. Native to southern Africa, it has now spread to the United States, New Zealand, Australia, southern Europe and China.

Today, the lifelong Inverness resident describes that hike as the moment that inspired her ongoing, informal crusade against invasive plants, and against this grass in particular.

“It’s just swallowing the forest,” said Boyes last Friday as we stood in a patch of Ehrharta growing under Douglas fir trees at Sky Camp. “No native would ever grow here,” she added. “There should just be pine needles and forest floor.”

Like many invasives, Ehrharta spreads easily and can grow on many different landscapes. It thrives on the barren hills near the Point Reyes lighthouse, under dense forests, on dry hillsides, and in foggy Inverness gardens. Seeds can be spread by lawnmowers, hikers and clinging to animals’ coats. And where it grows in dense patches, the native flora that would otherwise grow there vanishes.

“I think Ehrharta is one of the most worrying invasives around,” Boyes said. “Over the last 15 years I’ve alerted hundreds of people who are now concerned and paying attention to it—gardeners, road crews, the National Park Service, people who run heavy equipment.”

Boyes has always had a green thumb, she said, and when she was seven years old she started helping her older sister in her garden after the family moved from Berkeley to Inverness. By the time she was ten, she was getting paid to weed neighbors’ vegetable and flower plots. Working with plants, mainly through gardening, has been her career and avocation ever since.



Molly Boyes pointed out the invasive Ehrharta grass that grows under Douglas firs at Sky Camp. Photo by Jacoba Charles.

“It was as a result of being a gardener that I started paying attention to invasives and natives, and observing the differences between them,” Boyes said. “It was really depressing for a long time. Once you start seeing them, you can’t stop.”

Private property owners and public land managers such as the Point Reyes National Seashore (PRNS), the state parks and the local water districts all are fighting an uphill battle against invasive plants. Some species are well known, such as French broom, pampas grass and distaff thistle, said vegetation ecologist Janet Klein with the Marin Municipal Water District. Others are comparatively unknown, such as licorice plant, which is still sold at nurseries but is becoming a problem in the hills above Stinson Beach.

The risk of newly arrived invasives is constant. When I met Boyes at the White’s Pool parking lot to carpool, she paused to finger the rough leaf of a tall plant with a dandelion-like flower.

“This is bristly ox-tongue,” she said. “I’ve only noticed it in the last few years,

and now it’s just everywhere. It’s gnarly. Nothing will eat it.”

On PRNS lands alone there are 30 exotic plants invasive enough that they are considered to be threatening the diversity of native plants, said park spokesman John Dell’Osso. Battling these problem plants is tough, since by definition they are aggressive and adaptable. In addition, funding is scarce and the work is labor intensive—infestations are often hard to reach and time-consuming to remove. The deep roots of broom lock into hard earth and have to be pried out with a wrench. Wiry clumps of pampas grass must be hacked down to a manageable size and then dug out with a shovel.

Ehrharta is particularly tricky to combat. Its small tufts are resistant to fire and shade. Smothering with plastic, mulch or cardboard can work, but only if the entire patch is covered, since new seeds would just root on top of the pile, Klein said. Household herbicides such as Roundup work great, whereas mowing actually can spread the

seed—and the problem.

Some people with good intentions spread seed by mowing, or transporting yard waste in uncovered pickup trucks. Some object to any and all use of herbicides. Some don’t know—or care—that invasive plants exist on their lands, and seeds spread to surrounding properties, often undoing someone else’s hard work.

A future of unending tending to nature as if it were a garden is one daunting prospect of today’s plague of invasives. The alternative is to accept that our historic ecosystems are disappearing fairly quickly. Swaths of French broom will replace meadows; fields of Ehrharta will replace delicate trillium; ice plant and European beachgrass will crowd out the low lupine that grows on dunes.

“I believe that humans are stewards of the environment and that we’re supposed to be part of it,” Boyes said. “Native people didn’t have a word for wilderness because everything *was* a garden to be tended. So a hands off attitude toward nature may be becoming outdated.”



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