



Fountain grass in a Tucson Mountains Wash.

Of the many threats to our native plants and animals, the spread of invasive nonnative species is a great concern. When they invade new areas, they can displace native plants and animals as they compete for ground surface, sunlight, moisture, and nutrients. They can cause drastic changes in the landscape and can affect the entire ecosystem. Invasive grasses tend to provide fuel for fires that destroy the natives. This flyer is one in a series, describing problematic invasive species and telling you what you can do to help save our Arizona desert.

### What is fountain grass?

Fountain grass is a tall, graceful, perennial bunchgrass that was introduced to Arizona from Africa as a landscaping plant. The narrow leaves are brown in winter and green in summer, when the plant produces long, white seed heads. These heads produce large numbers of wind-dispersed seeds, which establish easily outside of landscaped areas. Fountain grass is commonly seen spreading along roadsides, and in washes and canyons in southern Arizona, where it forms large, dense colonies.

### Why is fountain grass harmful?

Dense fountain grass colonies crowd out other species and are difficult to eradicate. The plants reduce the space available for native species and compete with them for scarce water and nutrients. Fountain grass leaves dry when dormant or dead and produce tinder-dry fuels that quickly carry wildfires. Our native Sonoran Desert plants do not form continuous stands and do not produce adequate fuels to carry wildfires. Because our native cactus, shrubs, and trees did not evolve with fire, they are seriously damaged by it. Fires that kill native plants create even more space for fountain grass and other nonnative species.



Within just a few years, the single plant above had produced enough seed to fill this section of a wash one quarter mile upstream where fountain grass, has choked out the native flowers and grasses.

# Threats to Arizona's Native Species: Fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*)

**What alternatives are available?  
for landscaping?**

Many native grasses are available. The ones that most closely resemble fountain grass, but do not become invasive include:

*Muhlenbergia capillaris*

Deer grass, *Muhlenbergia rigens*

Bull grass, *Muhlenbergia emersleyi*

If you want a plant that grows in clumps with even more dramatic effect, try some of the native accent plants such as Desert spoon, (*Dasyilirion wrightii*) or *Nolina* (*Nolina bigelovii*).

Or, if you really want to plant a fountain grass, use the red variety. It produces fewer seeds and is much less invasive, although it has been found growing wild in the Mohave Desert.



*Muhlenbergia capillaris* a native alternative to fountain grass.

**What is the best way to  
control fountain grass?**

Fountain grass spreads by seed and removing seed heads will slow its spread. Since it seeds several times a year, vigilance is required. The only way to prevent future seed production and to reduce the threat of wildfire is to remove all fountain grass plants, pulling them up by hand or digging them out with a shovel or crowbar. Disposing of the entire plant after removal will eliminate seeds caught in the leaves at the base of the plant, which can spread after the plant is uprooted. After removing fountain grass, consider planting native species in the area. After removal, check the area periodically for fountain grass seedlings, which are easy to pull when young.



*Drawing by Kim Russek  
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