

Cape Ivy: A Plant to Look Out For

by Charles Kennard

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The rampant, non-native plant Cape ivy has rapidly become a serious problem along coastal streams up and down California and Oregon. It smothers and eventually excludes nearly all other vegetation, thus destroying habitat for wildlife, and is unpalatable or toxic to wildlife, including fish.

Until recently we thought our watershed was free of Cape ivy, but it has been found at three creekside locations in San Anselmo and one in Kentfield. Now, when it is relatively new to our valley, is the time to look for it and remove it before it spreads.

Cape ivy, a member of the sunflower family, has gone by several common and scientific names. The Cape in question is in South Africa, where the vine is native—and uncommon—in mountain forests. Long known to



Cape ivy, an extremely invasive non-native plant, is getting a foothold in our watershed..

Germans, it is correspondingly called by them *Kap-Efeu*, but here often misleadingly referred to as “German ivy.” Its current scientific name is *Delairea odorata*, suggestive of the somewhat acrid smell of its broken foliage. Although it was introduced as a houseplant to the eastern U.S. in the 1850s, not until the 1950s was it recorded as being available in California; ten years later it was becoming naturalized in Golden Gate Park and in Marin County.

The yellow-green vine blankets the ground and low-growing shrubs; from there it climbs up into trees, forming thick curtains. Its leaves are 2 to 4 inches across, with five or six pointed lobes. It is unlike English or Algerian ivies in that it has fragile stems and thin leaves. Cape ivy is particularly invasive because a new plant can generate from any broken stem that washes downstream and lands on moist soil. Winterblooming yellow flower heads also set it apart from other vines. The native wild cucumber, or manroot, has leaves similar to Cape ivy’s, but the former plant uses twining tendrils to climb, whereas the nonnative vine twists its stem around neighboring plants. Wild cucumber leaves and stems wither at the onset of summer, unlike Cape ivy’s. A distinctive feature of Cape ivy is its purple underground stems. Because its shallow, weak roots fail to hold soil in place, this ivy can contribute to bank erosion during storms.

If we catch them early enough, any colonies of Cape ivy in our watershed can be eradicated by diligent hand-gathering and bagging. Sun-drying pulled growth doesn’t kill it: even herbarium specimens have resprouted in humid conditions! A targeted site should be revisited every other month in the first year, to tease out remaining roots and shoots, and less frequently in the following years. Propagation of Cape ivy by seeds is, fortunately, very rare in California. At Audubon Canyon Ranch, volunteers led by Len Blumin have successfully tackled a 6-acre patch over several years; at Muir Beach, the PRBO has documented an increase in the numbers of nesting songbirds after Cape ivy was removed from the vicinity of Redwood Creek. Major infestations in Point Reyes and in the GGNRA are being dealt with by cutting down all the brushy vegetation covered by the vine, which is then covered and baked in the sun.

The herbicide Round-up applied in late spring is effective, but inadvisable near creeks. Scientists in the Bay Area and South Africa are researching natural control methods using African

moths and gall-flies, although much experimentation must be carried out to ensure that members of the sunflower family which are native to California would not also be attacked by any imported insects.

Please let Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed know if you suspect you have Cape ivy on your property. If you cannot remove it yourself, we will do our best to control it. Above all, don't toss any piece of the plant into the creek!

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