

Invasive Plants in Pennsylvania

Ravenna Grass

Saccharum ravennae



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Background:

Ravenna grass, also known as hardy pampas grass, is a newly emerging invasive species, has been in the horticultural trade since at least 1921. It is a tall bunchgrass, prized by gardeners for its dramatic display sustained throughout all four seasons. It is readily available from nurseries.

Range:

A native of the Mediterranean, Ravenna grass is named after the town of Ravenna, Italy. In the U.S., it is a problem predominately in the west, although disjunct populations are scattered across the country. It may increase its range and should be watched closely.

Description:

Ravenna grass is a perennial bunchgrass with six-foot tall blades surrounding towering, bamboo-like flowering canes which may exceed 10 feet in height. Its leaves are weakly serrated with hairy bases and a thick white vein on the underside. The feathery plumes contain many tiny seeds.



The Nature Conservancy
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Habitat:

Ravenna grass is a specialist of moist soils and harsh substrates, such as gravel banks. Riparian zones, seeps, wetland edges and floodplains are all fair game for invasion. It is relatively cold-tolerant and can withstand regular freezes.

Biology and Spread:

The thousands of seeds contained in each plume are dispersed by the wind. Whether a seed bank accumulates is unknown. This species grows quickly and easily re-sprouts after taking damage.

Ecological Threat:

Ravenna grass establishes itself with little disturbance required, putting intact plant communities at risk. It can form impenetrable monocultures, growing out from beneath other vegetation before outcompeting the native plant community. Established stands may bring fire into riparian zones and anchor soils normally subject to shifting. Ravenna grass can also act as a physical barrier to stream flow.



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How to Control this Species:

Physical

Because this species is a recent problem, no control methods are specifically indicated as of yet. Physical removal of young clumps before they reach reproductive size is recommended. Snipping off and containing the seed plumes will reduce re-infestation the following season.

Look-A-Likes:

Due to its large size, Ravenna grass does not resemble any United States natives. It may be confused with the non-native, invasive common reed (*Phragmites australis*), pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) and jubata grass (*Cortaderia jubata*).



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Burning is not expected to be an effective management technique, given the stubborn nature of Ravenna grass, although this has not been thoroughly examined.

Chemical

Organizations are currently experimenting with various types of chemical control. The herbicide glyphosate sprayed in the fall on foliage is likely to be effective.

Native Alternatives:

While no plant indigenous to the United States can match the exact look of Ravenna grass, there are many native grasses to choose from that maintain wonderful visual displays. These includes pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) and eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*).



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References:

BugwoodWiki (Jeffrey Firestone, Global Invasive Species Team, The Nature Conservancy):

http://wiki.bugwood.org/Saccharum_ravennae

For More Information:

To learn more about invasive plants in Pennsylvania and the northeast, here are some useful resources:

DCNR Invasive Species Site: <http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/conservationscience/invasivespecies/index.htm>

Plant Invaders of Mid-Atlantic Natural Areas, National Park Service: <http://www.nps.gov/plants/alien/pubs/midatlantic/midatlantic.pdf>

Invasive Plants Field and Reference Guide, U.S. Forest Service: http://na.fs.fed.us/pubs/misc/ip/ip_field_guide.pdf