



## ARTICLE SUBMITTED

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**Contact:** Christy Martin, CGAPS PIO, Cell: (808) 722-0995

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### Stopping the Next Miconia

In a world of more than 200,000 species of plants, there are bound to be a few bad apples. More specifically, a few plants exist that don't play well with others because they are ultra-competitive. These plant species are ultra-competitive because they are adapted to survive in the presence of their natural enemies—competing plants, plant predators or diseases in their home range. When we move these plants to a new location, like Hawaii, we remove them from their competition and they become invasive species. Invasive plants are the bullies of the gardens and forests. They grow quickly, and take over more and more space, stealing water, sunlight and nutrients from other plants. Some invasive plants also engage in chemical warfare by changing the chemistry of the soil, which prevents other plants from growing around them.

Some invasive ornamental plants such as strawberry guava, fountain grass, miconia, and kahili ginger were imported to Hawai'i and planted in yards and gardens. Their seeds were carried by wind and animals out of our yards and into natural areas. Now they are showing us just how competitive they can be.

We can't blame the plants for being competitive. Although not purposefully done, we are responsible for moving these plants around, unknowingly endangering Hawaii's native plants, ecosystems, and watersheds. Sadly, the laws that could keep new invasive plants out of Hawaii are patchy at best, and we could be destined to make the same mistakes over and over again, if we don't work together on this issue.

For example, all incoming plants and seeds must be declared, but unless they are listed on the Federal or State noxious weed or seed lists, they are not checked for their potential to become invasive. That means that it is legal to import more than 200,000 species of plants into Hawai'i. Scientists estimate that perhaps 10% of these plants could become invasive.

The good news is that we don't have to play this biological roulette. There is a screening tool called the Hawai'i Pacific Weed Risk Assessment (HPWRA), which could be used as a "background check" to learn a plant's history and tendencies before it is imported and planted in Hawai'i. The HPWRA system uses a technician (screener) to collect published information about a plant's biology and invasive tendencies elsewhere. The questions result in a score that is a prediction of whether a plant is likely to be invasive in Hawai'i. The HPWRA has proven to be 95% accurate in flagging the major invasive plants. This is a non-regulatory service that is FREE to anyone who imports plants that may be new to Hawai'i.

Nursery and landscaping associations statewide are being pro-active in signing up for this service, and are going above and beyond what is mandated by state law in this effort to protect Hawai'i from invasive ornamental plants. The Hawai'i Island Landscape Association (HILA) has recently adopted a list of voluntary actions called "Codes of Conduct," which includes the following measures:

- HILA members will submit the names of new plant introductions to be screened using the HPWRA, to learn their potential to become invasive if imported to Hawaii.
- HILA has worked with natural resource/conservation groups to identify some incipient (not widespread) invasive ornamental plants that they will encourage their members to discontinue use/sale of, wherever possible.
- HILA will identify non-invasive alternatives to some invasive ornamentals and help promote the use of non-invasive plants.

Other groups that have agreed to Codes of Conduct and use of the HPWRA include the O'ahu Nursery Growers Association, the Kaua'i Landscape Industry Council, the Maui Association of Landscape Professionals, Harold L. Lyon Arboretum and the National Tropical Botanical Garden. Both Lyon Arboretum and NTBG have agreed to have new plant introductions screened using the HPWRA, remove some incipient invasive plants from display, and help educate the public about the issue. Others, like Wal-Mart Garden Marts statewide have agreed to not sell certain invasive plants, and the Landscape Industry Council of Hawai'i (LICH) endorses the Codes project.

Anyone who imports plants that might be new to Hawai'i is encouraged to submit plant names for screening. Plant names may be emailed to [hpwra@yahoo.com](mailto:hpwra@yahoo.com), or call the HPWRA screener, Chuck Chimera at (808) 264-1202.

More information on the HPWRA and Codes of Conduct can be found at [www.lichawaii.com](http://www.lichawaii.com) (click on invasive species).

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*Christy Martin is the Public Information Officer for CGAPS (Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species) based in Honolulu.*