

NURSERY PAPERS

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Grow Me Instead – How the nursery industry is addressing the spread of invasive plants

As environmental awareness among the Australian community escalates, the need for Nursery & Garden Industry Australia (NGIA) to promote its environmental credentials has never been more vital. In recent years, NGIA has taken significant steps to address key environmental issues. In this month's Nursery Paper, Robert Chin and Delwyn Thomas provide an overview of the national Grow Me Instead (GMI) program developed by NGIA in conjunction with the Australian Government to combat the spread of invasive plants.

The GMI program was officially launched at the Melbourne International & Flower Garden Show (MIFGS), April 2009 to delegates attending the Victorian Horticultural Media Associations MIFGS dinner.



Grow Me Instead – How the nursery industry is addressing the spread of invasive plants

The nursery industry - Protecting our environment



To halt the spread of garden escapes and preserve the beauty and sustainability of the natural environment, a unified effort by nurseries, councils and other government agencies is essential.

Many of the plants innocently introduced from other parts of the world, as well as some Australian native plants grown outside their native region, now pose a real threat to the long term health of the

natural environment. These plants are often very good at out-competing local species, destroying habitat of wildlife and threatening biodiversity.

The national Grow Me Instead (GMI) educational program is the largest and most important initiative undertaken by NGIA to address the spread of environmental weeds (environmentally invasive plants). This program engages the nursery industry in a positive and proactive manner to educate gardeners and the wider public towards reducing the number and impact of invasive plants.

Reducing the impact is a whole of community issue which requires a whole of community solution. To achieve this, there is a requirement for greater public education and understanding.

Many of the plants that have become invasive came from private gardens, from early colonists, from imports both determined and accidental, and from transplanting plants outside their natural area.

In developing the GMI program, NGIA professionals worked closely with the Australian Government and key weed management agencies, including the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), Local Government Authorities (LGA's) the Botanic Gardens and Natural Resource Management (NRM) authorities. The GMI program is intended to further support existing Government Bushcare, Landcare, Coastcare and other related programs.

Unlike more regulatory approaches, such as a mandatory invasive plants labelling scheme, the GMI program provides a viable process to engage businesses in a natural partnership towards effective weed management. It ensures that horticulturalists and gardeners are equipped with correct and helpful information, essential to decrease the impact and spread of invasive plants. In doing so, this program effectively provides a basic, common sense approach whilst offering first class information. It guides consumers towards recognising their local garden centre as the professionals in providing the information and tools they require.

Aims and objectives of the Grow Me Instead Program

Nursery & Garden Industry Australia is ultimately aiming to educate the gardening public about more responsible plant choices for their gardens. Additionally, the education and promotion of better garden management practices will reduce the risk and spread of invasive plants.

The successful promotion and sale of superior, alternative, non-invasive plants will ultimately and inevitably assist in reducing the number of invasive plants grown by production nurseries whilst promoting the local garden centre as the place to go for further advice and knowledge.

The key objectives of this program are:

- To engage businesses within the nursery and garden industry as responsible community leaders on invasive plant issues
- To develop the capacity of these businesses to understand and appropriately respond to the issue of invasive plants
- To ensure that these businesses and wider industry partners (e.g. horticultural media) are providing consistent and reliable advice to consumers about responsible plant choices and appropriate garden practices
- To provide a professional 'shop front' image
- To present the key messages about invasive plants in a format most appropriate to home gardeners

What is a Grow Me Instead booklet?

For each state/territory, a Grow Me Instead booklet has been developed that identifies:

- 27 garden plants, proven to be a threat in the natural environment
- 3 superior, non-invasive plants which are recommended as alternatives
- Instructions for removal and disposal of the invasive species
- Explanation of terminology regarding noxious, invasive and adventitious plants

These free booklets, made available to the public through garden centres, local government environmental weeds offices, DPI and other agencies, are designed to educate gardeners and the wider community to recognise and remove the plants listed as invasive and replace them with superior selected alternatives.

Note: The Grow Me Instead booklets for Queensland are currently under development and will be released later in the year.

Cooperating garden centres will provide consumers with:

- Information on weed identification and how weeds spread
- Advice on correct removal and disposal of weeds
- Alternative superior non-invasive plant species
- Methods of creating an environmentally friendly garden

Plant selections for Grow Me Instead

In developing the GMI booklets, it has been extremely important to establish a set of consistent criteria which could be adhered to across all regions and states.

A) The invasive plants

Garden escapes can spread into bushland by many methods. Seeds may be carried by the wind, in water runoff or ingested and dispersed by birds and small mammals. Some garden escapes may also spread vegetatively, from stems, bulbs and corms after being dumped as garden waste. Better and more effective management of invasive plants will help to reduce the high cost of chemical control and to reduce the amount of time and energy lost in management of weeds in productive land for food crops, grazing land, cut flowers and forestry. Weed management in public spaces and on natural heritage land is costly, laborious and at times seems overwhelming.

The weed lists

There are numerous weed lists developed by various agencies including the DPI, LGA's and NRM's. These list pest plants by state and region, however, the pest plant criteria for inclusion in 'Grow Me Instead' was determined as follows:

1. The plant must be shown to be invasive across more than one area or part of the state
2. It can be either an Australian native or exotic species
3. The plant must be shown to, or have potential, to impact the environment, human or animal health or create stock or crop losses
4. The plant must be proven to have naturalised in bushland to the detriment of the natural environment

These 'Grow Me Instead' lists are not definitive for each area or region of Australia. There may be other problem plants you will recognise in your locality or region.

B) The alternatives

The selection of alternative plants suitable to grow in a wide range of soils in various climatic regions was a challenge. In devising these lists, consideration of the differences and adaptation to the local region was necessary. For the booklets to be of benefit in helping consumers they should be used as a guide to plant selection. There will be many other suitable plants available to gardeners at their local garden centre. Together with expert advice, horticultural expertise and guidance, gardeners can more easily choose better alternatives without fear that their garden will become an environmental hazard in the future.

Selection criteria for the alternative plants included must be:

- Currently recognised as non-invasive.
- Readily available to the gardening public
- Reliable garden plants
- Have low water requirements once established

What can garden centres do to maximise Grow Me Instead benefits?

Garden centres participating in this program are advised to maintain stock of the GMI booklets, point-of-sale material and information packs to assist them with this process. (If you do not have copies of your state GMI booklet on hand, contact your state/territory association and arrange to have them sent to you.)

What else can you do?

- Be aware of all the local weed lists in your region, at least obtain a list from your local council
- Organise in-house demonstrations to educate customers how to remove weeds and dispose of them correctly
- Label the GMI alternative plants for sale in your nursery to promote the sale of higher value plants
- Ensure use of the GMI point-of-sale material throughout the nursery.
- Ensure local invasive plants are not being sold by your nursery. Work through the 'Weeds Module' from the Australian Garden Centre Accreditation (AGCAS) scheme with your staff to ensure they are equipped to handle customer enquiries
- Consider holding a 'What Does Your Garden Grow' seminar in your nursery, garden clubs or local community centre.

The key consumer messages are:

- Choose non-invasive plants for your garden
- Remove listed invasive plants and replace them with recommended alternatives
- Promote responsible gardening practices to family, friends and neighbours to help reduce weed spread
- Ask for expert advice on local problem plants and recommended alternatives
- Learn environmentally safer gardening tips at your local garden centre

The Grow Me Instead – 'What Does Your Garden Grow' Consumer Education program

The 'What Does Your Garden Grow' educational program was developed by the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Australian Weeds Management. Nursery & Garden Industry Australia assisted in developing this excellent program and recommends its use in garden centres. To date, these 'train the trainer' workshops have been facilitated throughout Australia to an audience of over 600 participants.

To enquire about receiving a full copy of this program, please contact Dr Anthony Kachenko, Environmental & Technical Policy Manager, NGIA.



Grow Me Instead Project Manager Delwyn Thomas takes a Grow Me Instead workshop.



Grow Me Instead Project Manager Delwyn Thomas launches the new Grow Me Instead booklets at MIFGS in April 2009.



A Grow Me Instead workshop in Tasmania.

How will the Grow Me Instead program benefit production nurseries?

There are a whole host of benefits through involvement in the GMI program for production nurseries. Many nurseries have already taken action and demonstrated their interest and environmental stewardship by revising production schedules and removing plants that are deemed 'invasive'. As plants are often transported both interstate and intrastate it is very important that the destination of transported plants be voluntarily checked against the GMI lists.

Through active participation in GMI, there is considerably more to accomplish

- Discontinue growing plants listed in your state/territory GMI as garden escapes
- Implement NGIA national labelling guidelines to help gardeners make informed decisions about their plant choices at point of sale
- Grow higher value, non-invasive alternatives. If a buyer asks for a known invasive plant, suggest a superior alternative
- Obtain copies of GMI booklets to help educate your staff to recognise potentially invasive plants that might 'jump the garden fence'
- Discuss GMI and invasive plants within industry forums to ensure greater awareness of responsible gardening
- Keep abreast of industry and government press releases about invasive plants
- Attend education and training programs organised by NGIA and other stakeholders to become better informed



A selection of Grow Me Instead booklets

For further information

- Nursery Paper November 2006 Issue no. 9, Weeds and the nursery industry
- Nursery Paper October 2001 Issue no. 12, Discovering alternative to garden escapes
- The Federal Government website: www.weeds.gov.au
- NGIA website www.ngia.com.au
- Life is a garden website www.lifeisagarden.com.au

Conclusion

Nursery & Garden Industry is resolute about tackling key environmental issues, none more prominent than invasive plants. Industry is a key player and will continue to work towards lessening the impact of invasive plants on the natural environment. Participation and promotion of GMI across production nurseries and retail garden centres will ensure that this is achieved.

Grow Me Instead builds onto the NGIA existing nationally coordinated programs including National Plant Labelling Guidelines and Invasive Plants Policy Position that targets both production nurseries and retail garden centres. When combined, these programs demonstrate NGIA's ongoing commitment in tackling the battle against invasive species whilst educating industry and the greater public.

Acknowledgements

This Nursery Paper was written by Robert Chin, National Development Officer – Invasive Plants & Nursery Industry Development Officer, NGIV with contributions from Delwyn Thomas, Grow Me Instead Project Manager and Dr Anthony Kachenko, National Environmental & Technical Policy Manager, NGIA.