

'I'VE GOT ANGLED ONION IN MY GARDEN AND I RECKON IT'S OK!' ENVIRONMENTAL WEEDS AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

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Summary Without many people realizing it, a plague has been creeping across our landscape which threatens to destroy natural ecosystems. This environmental weed plague has already considerably reduced the conservation values of several parks and reserves in Australia and without quick action, their number will rise.

Increasing community awareness of the environmental weed issue and the important role individuals can play in their own backyards will help to reduce the problem.

INTRODUCTION

'I reckon this angled onion thing's pretty good. Why do these so-called scientific experts consider these things to be weeds? Because couldn't they just be using their own opinion? I use mine and I reckon it's pretty good.'

This was the comment of a member of the public at a discussion group at which he was introduced to the issue of environmental weeds as a matter for community concern.

Research conducted by Caltha Education for the then Department of Conservation and Natural Resources set out to explore some common community understandings and values. The research was done through four small group discussion sessions in rural Victoria and urban fringe areas. Both gardeners and non-gardeners, bush-lovers and non-bush users were involved.

As scientists and policy makers we are often so wrapped up in our subject matter that we forget what it was like when we did not have our current understanding of our favourite topic. As people in a position to influence the behaviour of others, we need to be aware of ordinary people's understanding and attitude, and how it differs from ours, so that we can more readily talk the same language and lead people gently towards effective action without getting their backs up or bamboozling them with specialist terms and concepts.

Experience gained in Eltham where an attempt was made to control potential environmental weeds in gardens and nurseries by Council has proved valuable. The attempt failed but the experience tended to suggest that capturing the middle ground necessary for support in a public debate will take time and patience. It is also very important to build on positive attitudes and avoid negative ones. The question of capturing the middle ground was also evident in the Caltha Education research. In the

small group discussion where those who rejected the weeds issue were articulate, others tended to swing that way. Where those expressing strong concern on the lines of 'We should stop this problem' spoke out, the group also tended to follow. In community education, it is very important to empower those willing to take a lead with a strong personal understanding and factual support.

As the comment by our angled onion friend above indicates, we do not have a sound basis for awareness, shared concern and sympathetic responses with many members of the public at present. People have not been told that environmental weeds are a problem, and generally do not have the biological knowledge and capacity for detailed observation of the bush that will bring this to their attention in the normal course of events. Yet it is fairly evident to most of us that without community co-operation many more plants will eventually run wild, both those old family favourites from Grandma's garden which are already a problem and new ones, imported through a nursery industry and a set of gardening attitudes which are ever hungry for new plants.

NURSERY INDUSTRY RESEARCH

Some preliminary background reading was carried out prior to the Caltha Education project. Research done by the nursery industry was found during this process. It indicated the important role of gardens and gardening in the lives of many people. We do not know the extent to which direct garden escapes and poor garden disposal practices contribute to the presence of environmental weeds. That is really a scientific problem which is beyond the subject of community awareness and attitudes.

But we do know that gardens, gardening, gardening media and nurseries and the nursery industry are all major avenues through which we can educate and influence community opinion and action. This is shown by nursery industry research which indicates that only 3% of people never garden, and even they may own a garden. So gardens of even neglectful or uninterested gardeners may be a source of environmental weeds.

Other findings were:

- one in four households visit nurseries at least once a month, and so nurseries have widespread access to the public,

- consumers trust nurseries' advice and expect nurseries to play an educative role in their gardening practices,
- green consumerism is helping to create a positive image for the nursery industry, but this also means people would like to know more about the products they are buying, and
- gardening programs in media are an effective source of promotion of new ideas.

All this seems to indicate that the best avenue for gaining access to and influencing public knowledge and behaviour on the issue is through the nursery industry.

ADDRESSING THE COMMUNITY—WHAT IS A WEED?

Group discussion showed that although most people were only too familiar with the idea of weeds as a problem that comes into their gardens, few recognised that the process goes the other way too. They enthusiastically recognised the concept of weeds in their gardens with terms like 'invaders', 'choke', 'strangling', 'take over', 'unsightly', 'wall-to-wall', 'they're much harder than things you want to grow', but seemed rather uncertain of (to us) basic ecological concepts of invasion of natural communities by alien plants. Areas of confusion were expressed:

- Can you tell a weed by looking at it? This obviously reflects the fact that in a garden you know it is a weed because it is one that you did not put there, but no such knowledge is available to most people in the bush.
- Is a plant a weed if you like it? This shows recognition that values are relevant, but which values? Nearly everyone likes some plant, even angled onion.
- Are all exotic plants weeds? (Autumn leaves in the Dandenongs are part of the scene much loved by many people).

To some, the fact that weeds could be whole trees and shrubs rather than little bits of grass that you pull out of garden beds was not self-evident. To such people, the idea that the bush was a series of distinct plant communities, each with their own character rather than just a generalized blur, was rather novel. For the first time they began to tease out the implications of this 'Are you telling us that if the same plant grew in the bush it would be a weed?' They also began to clarify with each other that those plants which tend to become problems in their gardens, holly, ivy and tradescantia being examples, would also behave the same way in the bush.

Here, an added complication was the idea that old garden favourites could be objects of dislike. This worried many people. Morning glory, periwinkle, broom etc. were pets to some and pests only to a few.

Take home messages:

1. Terms, definitions, concepts and understanding used every day are useful for preparing materials and programs – use ordinary people's language to describe weeds and weed related processes.
2. It is important to go back to basics and explain what you mean carefully and use understandable terms. Avoid going ahead too quickly.
3. There is very little public understanding of vegetation communities and the role of disturbance, vectors and dispersal mechanisms in the invasion of environmental weeds.
4. Limited recognition of weed species and of the extent of the problem was the biggest obstacle to understanding, as well as an understanding of the invasion processes.
5. Attitudes ranged from rejection of the issue to concern for ignorance and for loss of diversity, so it is important to do 1–5 well so that the middle ground will be empowered to explain and argue on your side.

ADDRESSING PEOPLE'S POSITIVE ATTITUDES

People generally expressed concern that plants in gardens could be a threat to the bush. Those that were more aware indicated that they already recognise the problem: 'The sense that it is undisturbed, the weeds really disturb my sense of bush. I like a sense of health, that it is connected in the right way', but most others spoke with vague but nostalgic feeling of the bush as a place of refuge from problems and a place that they would like to protect.

Take home messages:

1. Appreciation of the bush and desire to learn more and protect it are the greatest assets.
2. The value of diversity and the fragility of its preservation in remnant bushland is not understood by most people so they do not understand why weed invasions matter.
3. To many people, a readily accessible plant grown in a lot of gardens, cannot be a weed because authorities would not let people grow it. This is supported by people's vague understanding that there is a noxious weeds law, and that clearly any plant which damages natural vegetation ought to be in it. Therefore, it comes as a surprise to them to be told that all is not necessarily well in this area of land/water management.
4. When dealing with environmental weeds that have been long-established in gardens, the positive aspects of having them must be acknowledged 'These are old garden favourites but...'. Do not present it in such a way that people feel they were wrong in having chosen or liked these plants.

5. Present people with several choices about what to do. These may range from keeping some plants under closer control, taking a long-term decision to remove some when convenient, exciting people about the possibilities for alternative plants, and making people feel good about their rubbish disposal and other garden waste disposal practices e.g. compost heaps 'make your soil healthier'.
 6. Avoid falling into the natives versus exotics debate or arguing that only indigenous plants will do.
- The nursery industry is at an early stage of developing a professional environmental consciousness.
 - They are not particularly weed aware or aware of their potential impacts. They are generally only aware of the weed problems they have in their nurseries.
 - They can be suspicious and fearful of threats to their livelihoods.
 - There is a big range of outlets selling plants in Victoria and only some are accessible through formal organizations which creates problems for reaching the whole industry.

GARDENING ATTITUDES

To some extent the attitudes of gardeners, even those who just have a six-monthly grand clean-up, are directly opposite to those needed to understand the bush.

Qualities which are valued in gardens are control, abundance, colour, ease of growing plants, plants not needing a lot of care—just those qualities which make a really good weed. More careful and informed gardeners tended to reject the problem on the ground that it reflected badly on them, that they would not allow plants to 'escape', that they were responsible etc.

Take home messages:

1. Most people feel protective towards their gardens, even fond or proud of them. If you tell them there are plants they 'should not' have, they will feel guilty/angry at you for criticizing their garden, maybe helpless because of the dimensions of the problem.
2. People usually understand the concept of weeds in their gardens but are not prepared for the idea that they have got environmental weeds.
3. Make the link between gardens or farms and natural ecosystems – just as some plants are unwanted in a garden, so there are plants which are bad for the bush.
4. Careless presentation of yet another problem by another expert is more likely to produce guilt and negativity than to empower the audience.
5. Approached the right way, most people accept personal responsibility for preventative action, and support any appropriate lead which they are aware of. A common question was 'what are we supposed to do with our garden rubbish?'

SENSITIVITIES OF THE NURSERY INDUSTRY

The nursery industry is very sensitive to the environmental weed issue. This was revealed through early contact and research. Contact is continuing with the nursery industry and discussions are proceeding carefully to encourage co-operation.

- They continue to play a role in the introduction of new plants, many of which have environmental weed potential – both new plants and new versions of old plants.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

There are many resources and materials available to assist with environmental weed community education:

- Publications etc. are dispersed and can be difficult to obtain.
- There is an 'Environmental Weed Resource Directory for Victoria' which is one of the first attempts at listing many of the common publications and other resources.
- Particularly successful publications include foldout brochures/posters or booklets of local environmental weeds from a number of local government areas around Melbourne. The first developed by the Regional Pest Plant Strategy working Group in the Dandenongs.
- The local or domestic interface has proved the most successful approach.
- There are many other resources and materials needed to help the community become aware of and understand this issue. They should be directed at a Statewide level and on a local or catchment level.

WHAT DO WE WANT TO ACHIEVE?

It is time that environmental weeds became part of the community's vocabulary like the 'greenhouse effect' or 'endangered species'. Through awareness and understanding comes concern and ultimately sustained action to reduce the problem. We want to use people's appreciation of the bush as a way of introducing the environmental weed issue. The linking of what people do in their gardens to the problems in the bush is another important step to take. The ideal world might have environmentally friendly gardens with plants that do not invade bushland and other natural areas. Nurseries and supermarkets that are environmentally friendly, selling plants that are non-invasive. Pots and seed packets that have warning symbols, nurseries that have 'Bush Friendly Awards' and use their environmentally friendly image in their advertising campaigns, and nursery staff that give customers advice on practical and attractive plants that could be planted

safely in their gardens without fear of spreading into local natural areas.

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