

# GREEN GONE BAD

## FEATURED ORNAMENTAL PLANT: *IMPERATA CYLINDRICA* (JAPANESE BLOODGRASS, RED BARON, OR COGONGRASS)

Some exotic ornamental plants behave badly when they escape from the place they are planted. Infestations of these plants have negative impacts on nature. One of these plants is *Imperata cylindrica*; common name: Cogongrass (cultivars: Japanese Bloodgrass, Red Baron).

*Imperata cylindrica* is a perennial, colony-forming grass which can grow up to 6 ft. tall. The native range is Southeast Asia. It was accidentally introduced into the U.S. in packing material in the early 1900's. More recently, red cultivars have been sold for ornamental plantings. It is now considered one of the worst weeds in the world.



Infestation in natural area

*Imperata cylindrica* plants have a round base, not flat like *Andropogon* species, and lack a true stem like Johnsongrass. Leaves have an off-center, whitish midrib and finely serrated margins. Leaves are up to 6 ft. long, 0.5-0.75 in. wide, stiff, and have a sharp, pointed apex. Rhizomes are whitish, branched, scaly and sharp at the tips. Cogongrass is best identified in the spring by the large fuzzy panicle of flowers and seeds, giving the plant a cottony or silky look. Flower heads are 2-8 in. long, silvery-white and cylindrical.

*Imperata cylindrica* is an extremely aggressive invader that can grow in a wide variety of conditions. It forms dense, usually circular infestations that exclude all other vegetation.

It can reproduce both vegetatively and from seed. A single plant can produce up to 3,000 seeds per seed head that may be carried great distances by wind. Vegetative spread is aided by tough and massive rhizomes that may remain dormant for extended periods of time before sprouting. Rhizomes can grow from 5 to 10 ft. per year.



*Imperata cylindrica* can escape from planted landscapes into natural areas which results in reduction of plant biodiversity and overall quality of natural communities. It can easily displace native plants used by birds, insects, and other animals for food and shelter. Large infestations alter the normal fire regime of an ecosystem by causing more frequent and intense fires.



It may not be widely known among horticulturalists and landscapers that this plant can be harmful to natural habitats. There are many native alternatives to *Imperata cylindrica* such as Sweetgrass or Muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*), River Oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*), Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), Big Bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), and Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*).

Surveys are being conducted in May (Cogongrass Awareness Month) all over SC during the peak blooming period to find and eradicate any existing infestations. Please visit this website to learn more and to take part in the survey: <http://www.clemson.edu/for/cogongrass>.

*Imperata cylindrica* is a federally regulated noxious invasive weed. South Carolina State regulations prohibit the possession of all forms of *Imperata cylindrica*. Cultivars are still sold in other states and are sometimes still found in SC nurseries. Call 864-646-2140 (Clemson Dept. of Plant Industry) if you suspect an infestation.

