

PAMPAS GRASS: Alarming Observations in Southwest Alabama

photo and story by Gena Todia



◀ Pampas grass, The Nature Conservancy Archive, Bugwood.org ▲ Cortaderia selloana south of CR 321.

One of the most popular and commonly used landscape plants in my part of the world, southwest Alabama, is pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*). This large tussock grass with a cream-colored, showy, plume-like inflorescence seems to be present in every neighborhood and practically every other yard.

The Global Invasive Species Database (GISD) says the following about this species: “In its native range in South America, *Cortaderia selloana* grows in relatively damp soils and along river margins. *C. selloana* is found along streams and in the low wet areas of Argentina and southern Brazil. In its introduced range *C. selloana* can be found in sub-humid and semi-arid subtropical regions. Pampas is capable of becoming established on a wide variety of

soil types. Deep soil with good drainage gives best growth results. It is often found in open sunny places which receive added moisture, becoming naturalised as a weed in damp places, depressions, along stream banks, the margins of mangrove swamps and, in particular, disturbed areas associated with roads, pipeline cuts and walking trails in forest areas and waste places.”

With the above information and considering how residential and commercial landscapes in the area have been saturated with this species, I should not have been too surprised to see it growing in areas where it was obviously not planted. While I was aware that pampas grass is a serious invader in parts of California and other places, I had not seen it as an escapee in south Alabama or surrounding areas until about four or five years ago.

Imagine my surprise to see multiple pampas grass clumps growing in the dunes among the sea oats and scrub oaks while driving through Gulf State Park in Gulf Shores, Alabama. So far, pampas grass occurs only on the north side of the highway that runs parallel to the beach, and not on the beach proper. I have observed it in

other areas along our coast, such as near the edges of tidal marsh, in recently-used as well as long-abandoned dredge disposal areas near the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, fallow farm fields away from the coast, and along forest edges. Soil type varies widely, ranging from nearly pure sand near the beach to sandy loam and sandy clay loam away from the coastline. The common denominator for all occurrences is disturbance, either recent or historic. I first noticed escaped pampas grass shortly after major hurricanes in our area (Ivan in 2004 and Katrina in 2005), although I cannot confirm a connection between these storms and the seemingly sudden appearance of pampas grass outside of cultivation.

The GISD goes on to say, “*Cortaderia selloana* can form dense stands that exclude other plants. Its sharp leaves cut skin and can limit recreational use of areas, and it can form dense colonies that can become or increase fire hazards (May *et al.*, undated). Once seedlings become established, it is a substantial threat to the ecological quality of preserves, particularly in coastal and grassland sites due to competition with native plants. Its rapid growth and accumu-

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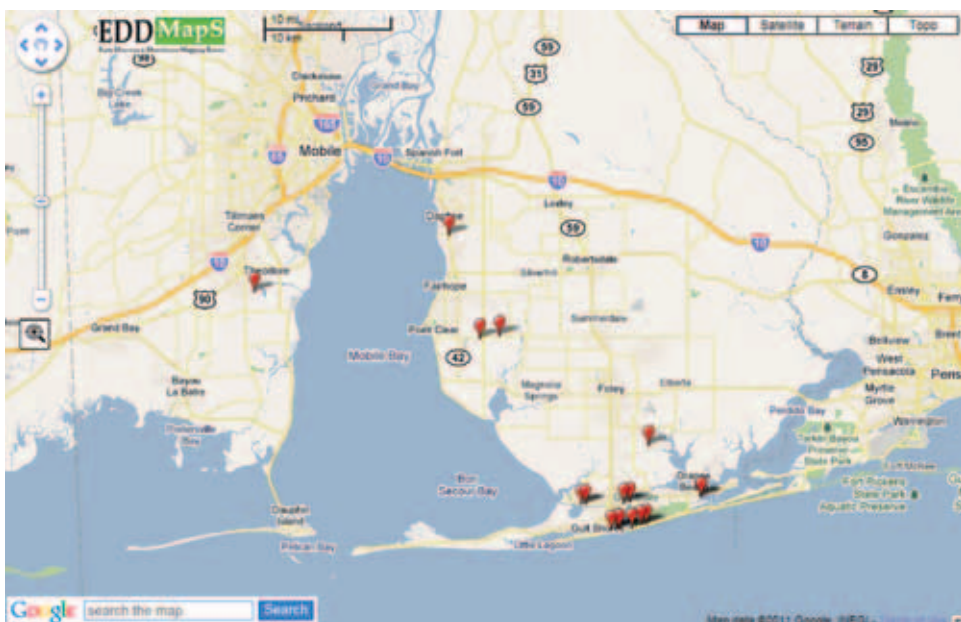
lation of above ground and below ground biomass allow it to acquire light, moisture, and nutrients that would be used by other plants. It can be damaging even at low densities because of the amount of cover it can occupy (Starr *et al.*, 2003)."

The occurrence of *C. selloana* outside of cultivation in southwest Alabama seems widespread and is becoming more common. Locations where I have found pampas grass have been entered in EDDMapS (<http://www.eddmaps.org/>). If you see this species in areas where it has not been planted, I would encourage you to do the same.

If we believe that this species is, or may become, yet another invasive exotic plant in the southeastern U.S., then what is the next step? Is there action that can be taken by state and regional exotic pest plant councils (and individual members) to bring about awareness, educate the public, work with the nursery industry, and nip this one in the bud before it's too late? As individuals, we can start by removing this species from our own properties. As professionals, we can share information with our clients and colleagues and make recommendations

on control and prevention. State and regional EPPCs can evaluate this species to determine whether it belongs on their respective invasive exotic plant species lists. They can also educate members and other annual meeting attendees about the invasive tendencies of this species. We as individuals can inform resource managers of public lands when we observe this species and provide them with information on control methods if needed. Ultimately, we cannot ignore the nursery industry and the role that they can play in helping to prevent pampas grass from becoming another widespread invasive exotic plant in the southeast. EPPCs can work cooperatively with the nursery industry to determine an environmentally responsible course of action that is not economically detrimental to nurserymen who grow this popular species. Working together, perhaps we can indeed prevent establishment of this particular species within our southeastern natural landscape.

Gena Todia, Wetland Resources Environmental Consulting, Daphne, AL, (251) 928-6157, jaget@zebra.net



Pampas grass distribution map, courtesy of EDDMapS, showing its expansion in southern Alabama.

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