

## **Removing Environmental Problems At Their Roots**

By David Goldstein, Ventura County PWA

### **The trouble with “Devil Weed”**

Giant reed (*Arundo donax*) is known as “the devil weed” because it causes so many problems, spreads easily, and is difficult to kill. It looks like bamboo, growing up to 30 feet high, mainly along the shores of local river banks.

It can grow thick enough to change the course of streams and crowd out native vegetation. *Arundo* does not provide habitat for local species of animals, raises water temperature by eliminating plants that provide more shade, and sucks up more than five times the water consumed by the typical streamside plants it replaces. When *Arundo* dries out, it also presents a fire danger.

*Arundo* is not truly eliminated from a site unless the plant’s roots are removed or killed with herbicide. Unfortunately, digging out roots in waterways can cause erosion and often spreads remaining pieces downstream, so it is often not permitted. You can keep your eye on the environment by discouraging anyone from cultivating *Arundo* in a garden. If any is growing on your property, address both the stems and roots, and do not place it in your yard waste recycling cart.

### **Alternatives to Toxics:**

The problem of household hazardous waste can also be treated at its root. In other words, some toxics can be replaced with safe substitutes, preventing waste before it can be created. Also, when people avoid toxic products, they reduce risks and costs associated with handling, storage, use, and improper disposal.

“Heloise” (who, in the tradition of Dear Abby, goes by just a first name) has an entire web page devoted just to the ways in which vinegar and baking soda can be used as simple, safe substitutes for a variety of household cleaning products. Of course, she includes the well-known baking soda-plus-vinegar solution for unclogging drains, but she also includes a few more obscure tips. For example, she details the time and brew cycles required for using vinegar to clean stains off a coffee maker; she recommends a mix of 2 cups of vinegar to 1 gallon of water and using crumbled newspaper to clean windows and mirrors; and she recommends 4 tablespoons baking soda dissolved in 1 quart of water, along with a damp sponge, for scrubbing fiberglass or porcelain sinks, tubs, or showers.

Less conventional advice sometimes seems more like “home remedies,” but occasionally a reliable source, such as the City of Madison, Wisconsin, includes safe substitutes on their web site. For example, the Madison web site suggests the following alternative for ant poison: “Sprinkle chili powder, talcum powder or powdered chalk” where ants might enter your home. For cockroach poison, they advise “Use a mixture of baking soda and powdered sugar or a light dusting of Borax...around refrigerator, stove and ducts.” Acknowledging the efficacy of such solutions may not be sufficient, they also advise, “Use cockroach traps,” a solution for keeping toxic products contained in a small area and easy to handle.

Sometimes mechanical solutions avoid hazardous products. For example, an electric sander can substitute for furniture finish-stripping chemicals. Soapy water can control infestations of aphids on indoor plants. A pan of white vinegar can kill snails and slugs. Toothpaste and a soft wet cloth can clean silver, according to the Madison web site.

*For more information:*

[http://www.heloise.com/hints\\_vinegar.html](http://www.heloise.com/hints_vinegar.html)

<http://www.cityofmadison.com/streets/hazardous/alternatives.cfm>

### **Turf Replacement: Grass roots drought fighting**

Kay Allen, an Environmental Compliance Program Coordinator with the City of Simi Valley, bought a house prior to our current drought, and that house had a front yard with beautiful lush green grass. As we entered into drought, she watered less and less until, by the summer of 2014, her once lush green grass was all but dead.

Using a rebate from the water agency serving her area, she obtained funds that helped her replace grass with a simulated dry creek bed, including small rolling hills, rocks of various sizes, and native plants. A bed of pebbles deters weeds.

If you want to follow her example, one important tip she shares for this type of landscape construction is to keep dirt mounds covered with a tarp to keep the wind and any possible rain storms from moving the dirt off your property.

Several local water agencies, both private and public, are offering the rebates, including areas of Oxnard, Ventura, Thousand Oaks, Simi Valley, and Port Hueneme. Call your water purveyor to check their participation in a rebate program.

For more info:

[www.bewaterwise.com](http://www.bewaterwise.com) click on SoCalWaterSmart Rebates.

<http://socalwatersmart.com/qualifyingproducts/turfremoval>

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