You’ve probably seen this deceptively beautiful plant in your neighborhood, a parking lot, or growing along a sidewalk. It seems like a great low maintenance, low-water plant, but *Stipa tenuissima*, also known as Mexican feathergrass or *Nassella tenuissima*, is an emerging invasive plant in California. An invasive plant is an introduced species that outcompetes native plants and wildlife for space and resources, causing harm — and is often difficult to remove or control once established.

**So what’s the problem?**

- Invasive in parts of the world with a similar climate to California
- Produces **1000s of seeds** that can persist in the soil for years
- **Self-sows** just about everywhere, making for unhappy nursery customers, neighbors, and landscape design clients
- High maintenance unless you enjoy weeding
- Seeds are dispersed by wind, water, contaminated soil, and automobiles
- Forms dense stands that thrive in dry areas, increasing **fire hazard**
- Fire simply enhances seeding and does not get rid of it

**Why is it **not** on the Cal-IPC Inventory as an Invasive Plant?**

To be on the Cal-IPC (California Invasive Plant Council) Inventory as an invasive plant, a plant must **already** cause ecological or economic harm in California. Because *S. tenuissima* is an emerging invasive species, there is not currently enough evidence that this grass has invaded wildlands to merit inclusion on the Cal-IPC Inventory. However, based on the results of a 95% accurate plant risk assessment tool known as PRE, *S. tenuissima* was deemed to pose a **high invasive risk** in a majority of our state’s climate zones. The plant was also added to the Inventory as a “watch plant” because of this high-risk PRE score.

Being PRE-rated as “high risk” is a key criteria for addition to PlantRight’s list of priority invasive plants. Stopping the sale of this plant before it escapes onto our wild lands and open spaces saves taxpayer money on costly removal efforts, while protecting our natural areas and native species.

**Fortunately, there are many beautiful, hardy, non-invasive plants to choose instead.**

Sources:

Anderson, F (2006); European and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organization; High Country Gardens [www.highcountrygardens.com](http://www.highcountrygardens.com);
Learn 2 Grow Gardening Guides; Milton, S. J. (2004); Pacific Island Ecosystems at Risk (PIER); PlantRight [www.plantright.org](http://www.plantright.org); San Marcos Growers [www.smgrowers.com](http://www.smgrowers.com); Sydney Weeds Committees; Weedbusters.
**Sesleria autumnalis | autumn moor grass**

A great-looking grass that is similar in appearance but about half the size of the more commonly used California deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*). A good choice for mass planting, smaller gardens, and containers. Rarely browsed by deer. Little supplemental irrigation is required, but it can handle more regular irrigation if soil drains well. Blooms in mid-summer with flower spikes about 3 feet tall.

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**Aristida purpurea | purple three-awn**

This California native looks so similar to *Stipa tenuissima* when it turns from purple to a light straw color that you may mistake it for the invasive plant. Thrives in sunny, dry locations with minimal water. Achieves the same fine-textured breezy look as Mexican feathergrass. Purplish awns reflect light beautifully. Seeds can stick to socks and animals, so plant away from paths. Can reseed in the garden but not too aggressively. Small birds like juncos will eat the seeds.

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**Sporobolus airoides | alkali sacaton**

Alkali sacaton is a graceful, fine-textured, clumping grass that is both tough and good-looking. It is deep-rooted and drought tolerant. This species is excellent for massing in hot, dry areas and can tolerate a wide range of soil conditions. A robust warm-season grass that flowers for many months, beginning in June. Can provide wildlife habitat and is often used by animals for forage, cover and nesting. Its seeds are relished by birds.

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**Muhlenbergia dubia | Mexican deer grass**

A great-looking grass that is similar in appearance but about half the size of the more commonly used California deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*). A good choice for mass planting, smaller gardens, and containers. Rarely browsed by deer. Little supplemental irrigation is required, but it can handle more regular irrigation if soil drains well. Blooms in mid-summer with flower spikes about 3 feet tall.

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**Bouteloua gracilis ‘Blonde Ambition’ | blue grama grass**

A long-lived, warm season grass that grows to the same size as *Stipa tenuissima*. Drought tolerant, has attractive flower heads, can be planted en masse, and is cold hardy. Grows in a wide range of soil types and is terrific for low maintenance landscapes. For best aesthetic in the spring, cut back in early to mid-spring.

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**Suggested Alternatives**

Go to PlantRight.org to see more!

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**Guide to Plant Care**

- **Suitable Climates**
  - Full Sun
  - Partial Sun
  - Medium water
  - Low water
  - Very low water
  - CA native or cultivar

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**Photo credit:**

- PlantRight
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- Pete Veilleux, East Bay Wilds