

Plants from tropical Queensland becoming environmental weeds in sub-tropical Australia: an emerging threat

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Summary There is an emerging trend involving plants that are native to northern Australia becoming established as bushland weeds in sub-tropical Australia (i.e. south-eastern Queensland and north-eastern New South Wales). Most of these species have spread from cultivation as garden ornamentals, and many are being promoted in the garden and nursery industry as ‘natives’ because they come from other parts of the country. There are already a few well-known examples of plants from northern Queensland becoming serious environmental weeds in sub-tropical Australia, such as umbrella tree (*Schefflera actinophylla* (Endl.) Harms) and cadaghi (*Corymbia torelliana* (F.Muell.) K.D.Hill & L.A.S.Johnson). However, several other less well known examples have emerged in recent years, including northern olive (*Chionanthus ramiflorus* Roxb.), Alexander palm (*Archontophoenix alexandrae* (F.Muell.) H.Wendl. & Drude), air potato (*Dioscorea bulbifera* L. var. *bulbifera*), weeping fig (*Ficus benjamina* L.), pongamia tree (*Millettia pinnata* (L.) Panigrahi), red

silky oak (*Grevillea banksii* R.Br.), giant palm-lily (*Cordyline manners-suttoniae* F.Muell.) and white oak (*Grevillea baileyana* McGill.).

Many of the environmental weeds currently causing major concerns in the warmer temperate regions of south-eastern Australia are native to south-western Western Australia, and vice versa. This situation has developed following the widespread cultivation of these species for several decades or more in southern Australia. As well as competing with locally indigenous plants like other weeds do, these species are more likely to interbreed with closely-related threatened species and pollute their gene pools.

The recent emergence of several north Queensland natives as weeds in sub-tropical Australia may indicate that a similar situation is in the early stages of development in that region. If this is indeed the case, such species could become a much greater threat to regional biodiversity, and a greater issue for conservation managers, in the future.