

WEEDS and the floral industry

Weeds pose a major problem within Australia and are estimated to cost the economy over \$4 billion per year through loss of agricultural productivity, environmental degradation and in the costs for their control. These costs are expected to rise, as existing weeds continue to spread. Rather than controlling the spread of weeds, preventing weeds from becoming established in the first place is a more effective approach to weed management.

Industries such as the nursery industry have taken steps to phase out the use of weeds; however the cut flower industry has been slower to respond. Recent assessments have shown that up to 170 species of weeds are being used in floristry throughout Australia. Because floral products are often transported over large distances before and after sale, they present an opportunity for weeds to extend their range over a much larger area than they would by natural dispersal methods such as water or wind.

The Flower Association in partnership with Griffith University undertook a preliminary project, *Pick Me Instead - Alternatives to weeds within the floral industry*, to identify weeds currently being used and to select viable alternative species for florists. It is hoped this initiative will encourage the industry to address the problem and voluntarily reduce the use of weeds.

What is a weed and how do they spread?

The term 'weed', in its most basic sense, is a plant that is in the wrong place. However, for the purposes of this project, a weed was "a plant that requires some form of action to reduce its effect on the economy, the environment, human health or amenity", as defined by Del Thomas and Bettina Gollnow in *What Cut Flower is That?*

The spread of weeds in the floral industry can happen via:

1. Seeds, berries or fruit in arrangements that germinate after the product has been discarded.
2. Vegetative propagation from plant stalks, stems or bulbs. All willows (*Salix* spp.) and asparagus ferns (*Asparagus virgatus*) easily propagate from cuttings.
3. Flowers. Whilst this is the least likely of all options, it is possible for flowers to become fertile or already be so at the point of sale and produce seeds that can be spread and possibly germinate.

For the *Pick Me Instead* project, a shortlist of weeds were selected from the original list of 170 weeds being used in floristry, based on the significance of the weeds. The weeds are considered invasive over a wide range of states and are listed in federal legislation such as WoNS (Weeds of National

Significance) or as priority weeds, and are also being widely used within the floral industry.

It was recognised as imperative, however, that if alternatives are selected and changes made, that it is done in a way that is economically viable for the industry. To ensure this, a set of criteria were drafted:

- the alternative plant must have a suitable vase life
- the alternative plant must be commercially available, or have the potential to be commercially available
- the alternative plant must have a similar appearance in its flowers and/or foliage
- the alternative must have no chance of becoming a weed.

The project represents an initial step to addressing the use of weeds within the flower industry, by first identifying the extent of the problem and then trying, where possible, to identify solutions. To facilitate a change within the industry, the information must be obtained in consultation with industry members and engage those within key points of the industry supply chain. The eventual phasing out of weeds within the industry will take some time as for some plants, there are no readily available alternatives. For others however, such as asparagus ferns, the process could happen fairly rapidly.

It is expected that following some further work over the next few months, the Flower Association will compile and publish a *Pick Me Instead* reference publication for members of the floral industry. 🐦

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What's wrong with our cover picture?



Asparagus fern is commonly used in the floristry industry. While this bouquet is beautiful and well constructed, it features a generous amount of asparagus fern, a weed which represents a considerable risk for our environment.

