

Invasive alien plants taking over Empangeni vegetation

Tracey Turner

EMPANGENI is under attack - not from above, but from below.

Invasive alien plant species are taking over the public spaces, threatening the ecosystem and even health.

In South Africa, these are classified into categories under the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (NEMBA) regulations.

The town's standout plant invaders include syringa, yellow bells, bugweed, lantana, and the highly dangerous famine weed, which are Category 1 species - the most harmful, which require eradication.

Along Paul Avenue near the golf course, bugweed stands as tall as mature trees.

Ian Howell, retired regional horticulturist for Transnet, and honorary officer with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife highlighted the worst areas.

"According to the by-laws, the municipality should have a weed inspector, but they're doing nothing here," he said, inspecting Paul Avenue. "They did spray here, but it's growing back."

Other hotspots include a dense bugweed bush at the T-junction of Thrush Road and ZSM Drive, a line of bugweed along Nkwanazi Street near Empangeni High School, and a dam overgrown with weeds at the bottom of Dumford Road.

Health implications

"Weeds must be sprayed with a herbicide that is registered for the weeds concerned, along with follow up spraying and dead weeds cut out," said Howell.

"If residents have weeds in their gardens, get advice first as they could kill other plants in the garden."

Mike Butler from Mtunzini Conservancy has overseen alien invasive clearing in his town under uMlalazi Municipality since 1996.

"By law under NEMBA, every property owner has to have a management plan to clear the aliens," said Butler. "Empangeni has worried me as I've seen famine weed

which is very dangerous and has serious complications."

In 2013, Butler co-authored a paper with Professor Ian Macdonald, which highlighted research that indicated in India and Australia, up to 70% of people living in areas where famine weed is prominent suffered from respiratory diseases directly related to the plant.

Impact on natural environment

He also flagged illegal dumping of garden refuse, noting invasives such as syngonium and devil's ivy take hold in natural areas and compete with the indigenous flora.

These can climb up trees into the canopies, making them top heavy and prone to falling over, or branches being broken off due to a higher mass in the tree canopy.

They also smother other natural plants and compete for light, space and nutrients.

Susan Smith, chairperson of Westville Conservancy, explains, "It destroys the ecosystem and your natural biodiversity disappears for plants and animals."

"In a natural environment, you have an ecosystem where everything works together - plants, insects and birds. When you have an invasive plant, it takes over to the detriment of the indigenous plants."

Smith said the copious seeds are also difficult to get rid of, with some lasting for up to seven years in the ground.


"I'm working in a forest that was infested by Indian laurel four years ago, and we still have seedlings coming up."

"Yellow bells are very attractive trees and it came in for that reason. You may think it doesn't do any harm because it's so pretty, but it does."

Butler adds, "It's about public awareness. If people and street committees do their part and put public pressure, the municipality needs to be told to do their job as well. By law, they're supposed to have a management plan," he said.

The municipality had not responded to the ZO's request for comment at the time of going to print.



Syringas sprouting along Paul Avenue  Tracey Turner



A bush of bugweed is a huge problem at the T-junction of Thrush Road and ZSM Drive



Bugweed spotted to have grown to mature trees in Paul Avenue



Watch out for famine weed 