Cortaderia’s soft, feathery plumes with their silver sheen, combined with the seemingly delicate arching foliage gracefully waving in the autumn wind, frequently put many a novice gardener under its spell. No matter how enchanted, please resist the temptation to plant one of these in any garden. Apart from its Cat 1b status, this is not a plant one wants to tangle with. Coping with hundreds of fine burning slash wounds caused by the very abrasive serrated foliage when handling the plants (planting, trimming) with bare arms and legs, is one. In a nutshell, despite its alluring appearance Cortaderia selloana and C. jubata have nothing to offer – they are tough and robust invasive plants that overrun unattended open space, displace indigenous vegetation and hamper roadside maintenance. Besides, we have many magnificent indigenous reeds and grasses that are really user-friendly to handle and use as alternatives.

This vigorous Cat 1b (must be controlled, removed and destroyed – no trade/planting permitted) weed persists throughout the region despite being targeted for focussed eradication/control campaigns on specific species by the George and Eden District Municipalities in collaboration with Working for Water in recent years. These campaigns have had a positive impact in our road reserves - with definitely fewer Pampas plants around. What is evident is the urgent need for ongoing, effective follow-up action to any eradication/control programmes. Development projects in progress have denuded huge tracts of land. Regrettably, other than the rare exceptions, alien vegetation control as an integral component of project management, is still way down on the scale of project priorities. These unchecked areas perpetuate the proliferation of undesirable plants that reach maturity, set seed and infest previously uncontaminated areas.

Identification: Pampas grass (Cortaderia selloana) is easily identified by the silver-white to pink or mauve (C. jubata) feathery flower stalks, which persist for months on the plant. The plants are robust and form huge clumps characterised by long stiff strap-like grey-green leaves with sharp serrated edges that are very abrasive. The flowers are respiratory tract and eye irritants.

Invasive Status: Pampas invades any seasonally wet areas, riverbanks, disturbed land and withstands exceptionally harsh conditions. It was introduced from South America as an ornamental and subsequently extensively used for stabilising and vegetating unsightly mine dumps. It is a declared Category 1b invader that displaces indigenous vegetation and transforms landscapes.

Control: Remove flower-heads (plumes) and where possible burn these. By removing the plumes one will prevent a fresh crop of seed maturing. A simple and practical solution is to spray the whole plant with a glyphosate based herbicide such as Roundup mixed at 3%. This method is effective for small and isolated infestations where the plants are relatively young. Large mature clumps can be cut back by hand or brush-cutter and allowed to re-grow to about 50cm and then sprayed as above (allowing some re-growth before spraying a plant that has been cut down is critical to successful eradication). This method is the most cost effective but the timing of the herbicide application has to be reasonably accurate to be completely effective. Persistent monitoring and timely follow-up as standard practice is the key to control or eradication programmes and brings about significant cost savings. Substitutes: Thamnochortus and Rhodocoma species (Restios – thatching reed).