Rubus fruticosus (European blackberry), R. cuneifolius (American Bramble)

There are several species of ‘Bramble’ in South Africa several of which are listed as weeds or invaders. In our region Rubus fruticosus (European blackberry) is becoming problematic. The spread of R. fruticosus (European blackberry), is already evident with serious infestations in our province. Hence its classification as Category 2: Invasive species or species deemed to be potentially invasive, in that a permit is required to carry out a restricted activity. Plants in riparian areas are Cat 1b. (L below)

Rubus cuneifolius (R) commonly known as American Bramble is listed as Category 1b: Invasive species which must be controlled and wherever possible, removed and destroyed. Any form of trade or planting is strictly prohibited. Rubus cuneifolius (American Bramble) is a very serious problem in KZN. Fortunately in our area the plant is not yet a major invader, yet vigilance needs to be exercised as seed dispersal by birds cannot be eliminated.

Both plants were originally introduced for the production of jam. The soft fruit is popular for use in desserts, jams and seedless jelly. Seed dispersal by birds, animals and humans eating the fruit resulted in the spread of these species.

Description: Blackberries/brambles are thorny shrubs to 2m high with strongly arching stems that root at the growing point of the shoot. The green foliage in groups of three leaves has finely serrated margins and is sometimes grey-downy beneath. The pink or white flowers on prickly flower-heads appear from September to January. The edible fruits (drupes) are red maturing to black, juicy and tart-sweet. Each drupe has one hard-pitted seed. The species are perennial plants which typically bear biennial stems from the perennial root system. In its first year, a new stem, the main stem, grows vigorously to its full length of 3–6 m (in some cases, up to 9 m), arching or trailing along the ground and bearing large palmately compound leaves with five or seven leaflets. No flowers are produced in year one. In its second year, the lateral buds break to produce flowering side-stems (which have smaller leaves with three or five leaflets). First- and second-year shoots usually have numerous short-curved, very sharp prickles rather than thorns. These prickles can tear through denim with ease and make the plant very difficult to handle.

Impact: Dense stands are impenetrable and restrict access to forestry plantations; they also restrict access to grazing and water by domestic and wild animals. Brambles out-compete and replaces indigenous woody and grassland species.

Control: Brambles spread by tip-rooting and sucker formation on the roots. Sucker formation is stimulated when the plant has been disturbed in any way e.g. by slashing, mowing, fire or the inadequate application of herbicide. The underground runners make the eradication of all Rubus species very difficult. The plant can either be removed completely and all parts destroyed or plants may be sprayed with a glyphosate (Roundup or Mamba) or triclopyr (Garlon 4) herbicide. If the plant is taller than one meter then it should first be slashed and the regrowth sprayed at about 50cm in height. Regular follow-up inspection and treatments of any re-growth is essential to ensure complete eradication which may take several years.