

Homestead Valley Backyard Gardening Invasive Brooms

by Kristin Desmond Ashley and Marabeth Grahame

Hello neighbors!

Well it's winter now and with all the rain we've had lately it's a great time to pull what are perhaps our most iconic invasive plants: French, Scotch and Spanish brooms. If you've lived here for a while you are probably familiar with brooms, if you are new, read on.

All three brooms are aggressive invaders, with French and Scotch broom being well established here in Homestead. These medium to large shrubs in the pea family have pretty, bright yellow flowers and an unfortunate set of super powers that make them here to stay and us rushing to keep up. The plant's oils and resins that ignite easily and burn intensely, along with their ability to transform meadows into shrubland, make them a very dangerous fire fuel and put them on the top of FireSafe Marin's list of fire-prone plants. They produce copious seeds which can lie dormant for over 50 years. A mature French broom plant can produce 10,000 seeds a year! If you've walked the trails during late summer you might have heard the distinctive popping sound the dry pods make as they burst and explosively scatter the seeds. If that wasn't enough, they provide habitat for ticks and poison oak. The plants are bitter to livestock and deer, except for goats who will nibble the leaves but not eat the stems. They create monoculture stands that crowd out native plants and fix nitrogen in the soil making it inhospitable for many natives.

Native to Europe and the Mediterranean, all three species were introduced by the horticultural trade and escaped from gardens. Long time residents remember how thickly covered parts of the Pixie Trail area were during the 70s, 80s and 90s. Every year the Land Trust pulls or weed whacks broom there and at other infestations around the valley. Much of Homestead Hill further west on GGNRA land also has established patches that volunteers with the Parks Conservancy's Invasive Plant Patrol have been weeding for decades. Come springtime, look to the hills for a splash of yellow, chances are high, that's broom.

Early and frequent pulling before seed pod maturation is the best way to avoid an infestation from getting out of hand. With only one tap root, broom is quite easy to pull when the ground is soft and can be uprooted with a bit of effort anytime. Pull small plants as soon as you can – test your strength, you'll be surprised how big a plant you can pull out! If you are removing an established plant or patch, you can cut them back but they will resprout, so pulling entirely is best although peeling the bark of the stump all the way around to below ground level will also kill them. To aid removing larger plants, a special tool called a broom puller clamps on at the base and provides leverage for uprooting. Due to the seriousness of the problem of broom in Marin, these pullers are available to borrow from the Homestead Valley Land Trust, Southern Marin Fire and Marin County Parks. A mulch layer will make it easier to pull new starts in subsequent years. You will have to keep up with annual removal, but if you do that regularly every winter and spring the effort is low compared to managing mature plants. Due to its fibrous bark, broom is not suitable for chipping and must be disposed of in green cans or debris boxes. Broom can be left onsite to decompose unless unopened, ripe seed pods are present.

French broom
Genista monspessulana

*Image: Marabeth Grahame, HVL
website*



Scotch broom
Cytisus scoparius

*Image: Marabeth Grahame, HVL
website*



Spanish broom
Spartium junceum

*Image: Marabeth Grahame, HVL
website*



And a reminder: brooms aren't the only invasives that are much easier to remove in winter. All of the plants we've covered this year can be pulled easily when soil is wet and they are small: echium (Pride of Madeira), thistles, helichrysum (licorice plant), ivy, cotoneaster, and acacia. You can check out past articles, as well as a full inventory of invasive and native plants on the [HVL website](#). Thank you for removing invasives! Every bit you do in your own garden helps towards maintaining our native landscapes.