

Thrips are black and measure only a couple of millimetres in length. They are strong and ready fliers. Immature stages of the pompom thrips are orange, with traces of black and are flightless. Eggs are light orange to yellow in colour, oval in shape, have bumps on their surface, and are laid around feeding areas on shoot tips and leaves. They are approximately half a millimetre in length, and are generally not observable with the naked eye.



Fig 5: Close-up of a thrip

Biological control represents the only long-term, sustainable solution for controlling pompom weed. With its high reproductive rate and ability to disperse, the thrips should have a marked impact on its target with no detrimental affect on our ecosystems.



Fig 6: Sadly, it has spread to some of our nature reserves in South Africa

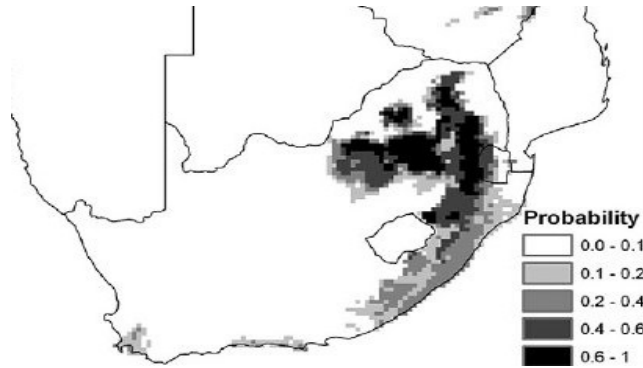
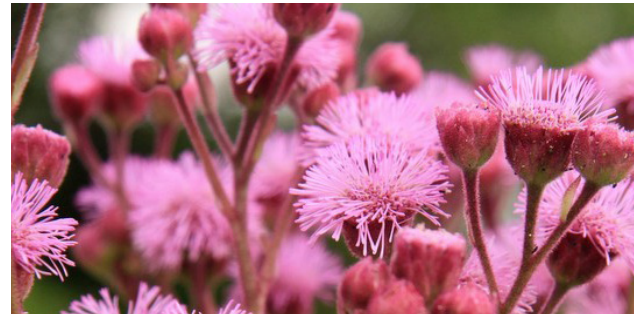


Fig 7: Invasion risk of Pompom in South Africa



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The Scourge of Pompom Weed



What is it?

A Category 1 invasive weed found throughout South Africa. Its pink flowers can be seen in the grasslands bordering some of Rocklands fairways between November and March.



Fig 1: Pom pom thriving alongside Rocklands 13th fairway - 2014

Where did it come from?

It originates from South America and was first recorded in South Africa as far back as the 1960's. How it was introduced is unclear, but may have come from Argentina in imported bales of hay.

What is its significant threat?

The plant is increasingly disrupting conservation of grasslands in South Africa and, without intervention, will invade and destroy large areas of the grassland biome. The absence of natural enemies better explains the plant's ability to invade. Pom pom causes a significant decline in plant diversity which will inevitably have a knock-on effect on insect diversity.

How can it be controlled or eradicated?

Herbicides are not the ideal solution because of their greater environmental impact (although herbicides have been approved for roadside applications). Mechanical interventions have been found to exacerbate infestations through disturbance.



Fig 2: Pom pom has been largely eradicated

At CCJ we tried cutting the flower heads (a mechanical intervention initially prescribed) however studies have shown that when a single pom pom stem is cut, it reproduces up to five new stems in the following flowering season. Thankfully, a new and very effective biological solution has been discovered in the form of a tiny pom pom eating insect.



Fig 3: Grasslands now pretty much free from the scourge of pom pom - 2021

Thrips (Liothrips tractabilis) our bio control weapon

These little insects were imported from Argentina (the likely origin of the Pom pom weed) by the South African Agricultural Research Council (ARC). They were quarantined and thoroughly studied to ensure they would only feed on the Pom pom and not threaten indigenous plants or agricultural crops. Thankfully they proved to be fussy eaters and were cleared for release in South Africa in 2015. Fayne Connelly approached ARC about our own Pom pom problem and CCJ was included in the Thrip release program. Our small batch of Thrips were released in the Pom pom infested grasslands on the left of Rocklands 13th hole at the end of 2014.



Fig 4: Thrips at work

Significant reductions in Pom pom infestation could only be expected 5 years after the release of the Thrips insects as they needed this time to multiply to significant numbers before their impact on Pom pom can be appreciated. In 2019 we introduced a second prong attack on pom pom by digging out plants as well. Today, seven years later, we are proud to say that with the Thrips and the physical removal of plants we have pretty much recovered the grasslands. Diversity of plants and the increase in the grass cover is a great success story. Whilst it's unlikely that we will ever eradicate Pom pom, this scourge will now hopefully become manageable and the eco balance restored.