

Agapanthus? Surely it's not a weed?

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While not a common weed of bushland, agapanthus does appear from time to time and can be troublesome to remove without destroying the surrounding bushland.

In its home of origin, South Africa, *Agapanthus praecox*, the cultivated species, is found in areas with 500+ mm winter rainfall and from sea level to 2000m altitude. You can see this plant is unlikely to be a problem in South Australia unless the bushland occurs in the hills of the Mount Lofty Ranges or possibly along creek and drainage lines in other areas. Agapanthus is much more problematic in the eastern states of Australia and New Zealand.

Most of us are familiar with the appearance of agapanthus. It is a large bulbous plant with long, dark green, glossy and strappy leaves up to 60 cm in height. It flowers in early to mid summer with a large cluster of flowers ranging from blue to white in colour at the end of 120 to 150cm long stalks. Agapanthus is frequently used in gardens to line garden beds and attract lots of snails.

It usually arrives in bushland via dumped garden waste or spreads from an abandoned or existing garden. If allowed to continue growing in bushland, it will takeover the ground layer eventually eliminating most native species. Agapanthus has an extensive root system that dominates the soil around it. Try digging up a mature plant from a garden! There are so many roots, there appears to be little room for anything else.

Although agapanthus will produce viable seed in the Mount Lofty Ranges, the seeds rarely spread far. Expansion into bushland is usually slow. It is one of the easier weeds to manage if weed fronts are utilised.

Large clumps of agapanthus reduce foraging opportunities for ground feeding birds such as red browed firetails - so our initial reaction is that it clearly must be a bad plant. **However**, eastern spinebills, crescent honeyeaters and other honeyeaters are quite likely to visit the flowers. So we moderate our view to accept that it can't be all that bad. Welcome to the complexities of bush regeneration.

If we remove large areas of agapanthus we are quite likely to put honeyeaters under significant stress. But if we leave it untreated, what is going to happen to our ground foraging birds, not to mention all the other critters we rarely see, ie ground spiders, ants, ground foraging bats and the like?

As with all bush regeneration we must take things slowly! Yes, you read correctly – slowly. What an unusual concept in our modern world where everything has to be done yesterday.

Agapanthus does not belong in our bushland. For the sake of all native plants and animals it must be removed. By working slowly and along weed fronts we provide an opportunity for native animals that may utilise agapanthus to find resources elsewhere over a period of several seasons.

Are there any similar native plants to agapanthus?

The only one native plant that could be confused with agapanthus is *Calostemma purpureum* (garland lily). The mature plants don't really look similar at all. *Calostemma purpureum* has white to dark pink flowers on stems to 50cm high, but usually no leaves are present during flowering, having died back beforehand. But seedlings of the two species could easily be confused and differences are difficult to explain. The best option is to leave any suspect seedlings for 12 months at which stage differences will become obvious, ie agapanthus has much broader dark green glossy leaves. If you are still unsure, wait a year or two and the flowers will be a dead giveaway. Agapanthus will not take control in such a period of time.

Effective control of agapanthus

As already stated, the best way to remove agapanthus, especially when it forms expansive clumps, is to use weed fronts. To begin with you should search for and treat outliers, then work on consolidating the weed front. Remember, a weed front can wander and meander for hundreds of metres if necessary. Once established, work along the weed front. Flower heads can be cut and removed from the site to prevent seed production. This can be quite useful on plants situated immediately behind the weed front, ie a shadow weed front as it will prevent new seed falling into the area you have just been weeding. If you are concerned about potential impacts on honeyeaters wait until the flowers are spent. The flower heads must be removed from the site. If they are cut and left on the site, viable seed may still be produced.

Spot regeneration is also useful. If you find a young shrub struggling against the agapanthus there is no reason why you can't step in and give it a helping hand by removing the agapanthus.

Weapons of agapanthus destruction

Do not hand pull or dig agapanthus at any stage of development. Even two leaved seedlings will break off at ground level allowing the plant to continue growing. Digging is just too disturbing and usually leaves bits of root and rhizome behind to continue growing.

Personally, I've had considerable enjoyment treating agapanthus using two methods: cut and swab and Tongs of Death. By far the most successful is Tongs of Death. Applying Glyphosate at a rate of 1 part Glyphosate to 5 parts water to the leaves of agapanthus is highly effective. This can be done at any time of year because agapanthus is leafy all year round. In summer agapanthus will die within 3 – 4 weeks. At cooler times of the year it can take much longer, up to 2 – 3 months! Naturally, summer and



ABOVE: Agapanthus has a large cluster of blue or white flowers at the end of a 120-150cm stalk. **INSET:** Calostemma, a much more attractive plant with dark pink to white flowers at the end of elegant 50cm stalks.



LEFT: Before being Toned to Death.



LEFT: A few weeks later.

autumn are preferred as there are less native herbaceous species to worry about. And the agapanthus dies quicker.

The Toning to Death of agapanthus can provide a welcome change to all that drilling and filling or cutting and swabbing of woody weeds, ie blackberry. Ouch.

Agapanthus can be cut and swabbed, but this is messy and less effective. And you are left with a heap of sticky leaves oozing agapanthus juice.

I have used it to get a clearer view of what I am doing, especially when spot regenerating around small shrubs, or when native grasses are mixed amongst the agapanthus leaves.

The normal 'swabber' is not effective as the cut stump rapidly oozes agapanthus juice gumming up the sponge on the swabber. I use a chemical wash bottle, otherwise known as the squeeze bottle used for drilling and filling, to carefully squirt Glyphosate over the cut stump. It seems to be more effective if a secateur blade is pushed into the agapanthus stump and levered around a bit to leave a deep slit in the stump before applying Glyphosate.

I use the same Glyphosate rate as for Toning to Death. It may be more effective at a higher concentration such as 1 part Glyphosate to 2 parts water. Feel free to try it and let us know if you are more successful than me. If they do grow back, just wait until there is plenty of leaf and Tong them to Death.

Oh yes, **Agapanthus is known to cause mouth ulcers.** So be careful, wear your safety equipment provided and thoroughly wash your hands afterward.

Finally, don't panic if you have agapanthus in your garden. This article specifically addresses agapanthus in bushland. Just be sure to cut the spent flower heads, especially if you live near bushland.