

Mystery 'Cyclone' invader a growing headache for Zimbabwe

By [Andrew Mambondiyani](#)

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Stella Mwareya cannot hide her frustration as she struggles, in vain, to clear a fast-growing light green shrub that is taking over her farmland. "There is no way to stop this plant," Mwareya dejectedly told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "It grows so fast and its seeds are very light and spread far and wide. It will soon take over everything."

Mwareya, who lives in Rusitu Valley, in eastern Zimbabwe's Chimanimani district, blames the invasion on seeds brought by devastating tropical Cyclone Eline, which hit the country in 2000. The feathery weed - dubbed "cyclone" by local people - has been a particular problem for farmers, commercial timber plantations and a nature reserve in eastern Zimbabwe over the past five years.

Plant experts believe the plant may be *Vernonanthura phosphorica*, a native of Brazil, and may have been introduced in neighbouring Mozambique in the 1990s, to attract bees and produce honey.



[Image Source: Flora of Zimbabwe](#)

But local people say "cyclone" is causing headaches, regardless, as it spreads across Zimbabwe's eastern highlands, including the Vumba mountains, the Burma valley, and Chipinge.

Thousands of hectares of land are now covered by the fast-spreading plant, which farmers say is nearly impossible to control. Villagers like Mwareya have tried machetes and hoes to clear the weed, while commercial timber plantations have doused it with chemicals and tried to root it out, all without success. "We have lost hope of stopping this plant," Mwareya said.

Worse storms, new pests?

Around the world, changing weather conditions and stronger storms linked to climate change are bringing new challenges for many farmers in the form of new or more virulent crop pests and diseases. Finding ways to control the pests is becoming a priority for protecting food security and incomes in many countries.

Bart Wursten, a leading Zimbabwe plant expert, said it was possible Cyclone Eline has spread the seeds of eastern Zimbabwe's scourge across the mountains from Mozambique. But he said he believed the main reason for its rapid spread in Chimanimani was that formerly well-tended farms had become neglected or abandoned after the country's chaotic land reform programme that began in 2000. "This, of course, happened at the exact same time, in 2000, as the cyclone," he said.

Wursten said the plant was an aggressive invader of disturbed areas and may have gotten a foothold in Mozambique as a result of slash-and-burn agriculture there. But damage from Cyclone Eline also could have opened areas for it to spread, he said.

Apart from colonising farmland in affected areas, the invasive plant is hurting harvests from orchards by starving fruit trees of nutrients, their owners said. "The plant is choking our fruit trees and lowering our fruit harvests," Mwareya said. "What is even worse is that this plant is completely useless to us. We can't use it for stock-feed, we can't even use it for firewood."

In some areas, including nearby Chikukwa, inventive villagers have found ways of turning some of the particularly large shrubs into fencing.

But Phineas Chikoshana, an official with a local conservation NGO, Chikukwa Ecological Land Use Community Trust (CELUCT), warned that the loss of farmland in the area was a serious problem. "If nothing is done soon crop farming is going to suffer forever," he predicted.

'This plant is so persistent'

Timber plantations in Chimanimani owned by Allied Timbers, Wattle Company, and Border Timbers are also not making any headway in controlling the plant, which they said is choking timber stands and draining soil nutrients, officials said. The head of the Timber Producers Federation (TPF), a grouping of timber companies in Zimbabwe, admitted they had failed to control the invader. "We tried weeding manually and even through use of chemicals but the plant is so persistent," said the federation's CEO, Darlington Duwa, who noted that the group is still trying to confirm the plant's identity.

He said the shrub would likely fuel plantation fires as it is highly flammable, particularly during Zimbabwe's ongoing severe drought.

Chimanimani National Game Park has not been spared, as the plant displaces other vegetation and creates thickets that are nearly impassable for wildlife, environmental experts say. Amos Chiketo, a local independent environmentalist with years of experience working with timber companies in Chimanimani, said Zimbabwe's government was too busy dealing with damaged infrastructure after the 2000 cyclone to pick up on the plant's spread.

"This gave the plant space to establish itself," Chiketo said. Now, "it's threatening to alter the abundance and diversity of plant species that are important habitat for native wildlife."

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