

Pennisetum polystachyon

[Synonyms : *Cenchrus sentosus*, *Pennisetum polystachion*, *Pennisetum setosum*]

MISSION GRASS is an annual or perennial grass. Native to tropical Africa and Asia it has bristled pinkish-green spikelets.

It is also known as Feathery pennisetum, *Herbe ma tante* (Seychellois), *Khachornchob* (Thai), *Ma tante* (Seychellois), *Nigolo* (Malian), *O tamata* (Fijian), *Queue de chat* (French), and Thin napiergrass.

Mature flower stems turn to inedible straw that subsides as overwhelming litter that blocks light to lower green leaves which become virtually inaccessible for animals to graze.

This drought-resistant grass is viewed as an invasive and noxious weed in Australia and the United States. It is also looked upon largely as a weed in Fiji and Thailand.

Polystachyon is derived from Greek *poly-* (many) and *stachyo-* (spike, ear of corn) components meaning ‘with many spikes’.

In many countries in the region of its natural habitat (not least India) young green mission grass provides fodder for livestock.

Like quite a few other plants however (especially in alien environments) mission grass can attract both opprobrium and praise. Since its introduction to Australia and the United States it has become invasive and where labelled ‘obnoxious weed’ has been the cause of much concern. In Australia it is supplanting a native sorghum (*Sorghum*) and in so doing is altering fire régimes sufficiently to cause a threat to woodland species that authorities are anxious to preserve. On the other hand there are some places where the mature grass, which will not only grow vigorously after fire but will also, more often than not, be unpalatable for animals, has been relied upon to assist in erosion and weed control.