

# Beargrass, a plant of many roles, is focus of new report

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Beargrass is an ecologically, culturally, and economically important plant in the Western United States and, for the first time, landowners, managers, and harvesters now have a comprehensive report about the species.

The report, *Natural and Cultural History of Beargrass (Xerophyllum tenax)*, published by the U.S. Forest Service's [Pacific Northwest Research Station](#), identifies critical knowledge gaps and areas for future research. It also documents how changes in disturbance, including fire, may affect the species across its range.

"Beargrass is emblematic of a web of natural and [cultural diversity](#) in the West," said Susan Stevens Hummel, a research forester at the station and lead author of the report. "This means that organisms and processes—like people, plants, and [pollinators](#)—are interrelated."

Beargrass is a member of the lily family that, when in bloom, produces a single stalk capped with clusters of white flowers. It grows in a wide variety of habitat types and conditions, but in just two geographic areas—from the mountains of northwestern Washington south into west-central California, and from Canada south into Wyoming along the [Rocky Mountains](#).

The plant provides food, habitat, and raw material for an array of [wildlife species](#)—from bees and flies, to rodents, bears, deer, and elk. Beargrass has longstanding cultural value and is harvested by Native

Americans for use in basketry and regalia, and for medicinal and decorative purposes. It also is coveted by the commercial floral greens industry, which generates more than \$200 million a year in the [Pacific Northwest](#).

Hummel, together with her coauthors at the Xerces Society and the station, found that historical and contemporary land use practices in beargrass habitat, combined with the rise of the commercial floral greens industry, are creating shifts in disturbances within beargrass habitat.

"We found that beargrass is experiencing decreased disturbance from natural and human-caused fire, but increased disturbance from leaf harvest by the floral industry," Hummel said. "Our report looks at each of these different disturbance types and their potential effects on beargrass, its pollinators, and on human gatherers."

Among the report's findings:

- Disturbance effects on pollinators and on beargrass reproduction and abundance are not well understood;
- Traditional and commercial harvesters seek different leaf properties and use different methods to harvest beargrass;
- No coordinated effort exists among landowners to monitor the volume of beargrass being harvested each year.

"This report clarifies for land managers the importance of beargrass and offers researchers a list of [knowledge gaps](#) about the plant," Hummel said. "By addressing some of the key issues identified in the report, forest management practices can be developed to help sustain the ecological web of which beargrass is a part."

**More information:** Natural and Cultural History of Beargrass is

available online at [www.treearch.fs.fed.us/pubs/42172](http://www.treearch.fs.fed.us/pubs/42172)

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