

Hundreds of weeds found illegally advertised online in Australia

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Hundreds of weeds have been found advertised on a public online marketplace in Australia. Cacti and pond plants were among the most frequently advertised illegal weed species. These weeds are prohibited in

Australia due to their harmful impact on the country's environment and agriculture. Despite this, a research team led by Jacob Maher discovered thousands of online advertisements for these weeds. Their [study](#) is published in the open access journal *NeoBiota*.

Trade of [ornamental plants](#), the kind grown in homes and gardens, is the major way [weeds](#) are introduced to new places. Some ornamental plants can make their way into the environment and become invasive, negatively impacting native species and agriculture. Increasingly, plants are traded on the internet, allowing a wide variety of plants to be introduced to more distant places. A lack of surveillance and regulation of this [trade](#) has resulted in the wide trade of invasive species.

In response, scientists from the University of Adelaide have utilized specialized software called 'web scrapers' to monitor trade on public classifieds websites. These web scrapers automate the collection of online advertisements. This allowed the researchers to detect thousands of advertisements for weeds over a 12-month period.

Despite Australia's laws banning the trade of harmful weeds, advertisements were observed across the country. Some of the weeds advertised were associated with uses by traders, including food and medicine. The most popular uses were associated with pond and aquarium plants such as filtering water and providing fish habitat.

The researchers recommend that governments adopt web scraping technology to assist in regulating online trade of plants. They also highlight increasing public awareness and seeking cooperation from online marketplaces as solutions to this growing problem.

"Currently, these online marketplaces allow people to advertise and purchase [invasive species](#), whether they are aware of it or not," says Maher. "Regulation is needed, but we also need to cultivate awareness of

among plant growers of this issues and we need help from marketplaces to regulate trade on their end."

The technology developed in this study is now being utilized by biosecurity agencies in Australia to monitor and regulate the illegal trade of plants and animals online.

More information: Jacob Maher et al, Weed wide web: characterising illegal online trade of invasive plants in Australia, *NeoBiota* (2023). [DOI: 10.3897/neobiota.87.104472](https://doi.org/10.3897/neobiota.87.104472)

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