

CLIENT HANDOUT • BEFORE YOU WEED

Natives Often Mistaken for Weeds

Some of the North Shore's best local plants look scruffy, spread a bit, or have an evil weedy twin. Here's how to tell them apart, so the right plant ends up in the bin.



Scurvy weed: native · Photo: Richard Fuller (CC0, iNaturalist)



Weeping grass: native · Photo: guymr, CC BY (iNaturalist)



Old man's beard: native · Photo: Sockrosma, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Why this matters

Every year, good local plants get yanked out of North Shore gardens because they look like weeds. Some are exactly what bush regenerators plant on purpose! They're free, already suited to your soil, and they feed local butterflies, birds and bees.

A few plants are trickier: truly native, but weedy in the wrong spot. I give you the honest story on page 7.

Three checks before you pull

- 1

Wait for flowers or fruit. Colour is the easiest giveaway for most pairs in this booklet.
- 2

Look closely at the leaves: count leaflets, check the veins and turn a leaf over.
- 3

Snap a photo and check PlantNET or iNaturalist, or send it to me. Still unsure? Leave it for now. A weed won't take over in a week.

Inside: the 8 pairs at a glance

Pairs on pages 2–5 · small natives worth keeping on page 6 · the grey areas (sweet pittosporum, fishbone fern) on page 7.

#	Keep (native)	Remove (weed)	The quick tell
1	Scurvy weed	Trad	Blue flower = keep. White flower = trad.
2	Weeping grass	Panic veldtgrass	Nodding, bristly seed heads = keep. Upright, open, bristle-free seed heads = veldtgrass.
3	Native raspberry	Blackberry	Ripe red fruit and small pink flowers = native raspberry. Ripe black fruit and big flowers = blackberry.
4	Wonga wonga vine	Cat's claw creeper	Three or more leaflets, no claws = wonga vine. Two leaflets plus a claw = cat's claw.
5	Old man's beard	Jasmine & Japanese honeysuckle	Three toothed leaflets and fluffy seed heads = native clematis.
6	Sweet sarsaparilla	Madeira vine	Three parallel veins and tendrils = native. Fleshy leaves and tubers on the stems = Madeira vine.
7	Wombat berry	Bridal creeper	Orange fruit = wombat berry. Red berries and glossy winter growth = bridal creeper.
8	Milk vine	Moth vine	Choko-shaped pods = moth vine.

Sources: PlantNET (NSW Flora Online) species descriptions; NSW WeedWise profiles (weed features & "similar looking plants"); RF Horticulture native-plants list. Full list p.8.

PAIR 1

KEEP · local native

Scurvy weed *Commelina cyanea*



Photo: Richard Fuller (CC0, iNaturalist)

- **Deep blue** flowers, spring to autumn
- Leaves 2–7 cm long, fairly narrow (5–15 mm wide), pointed
- Leaf sheath has short hairs at the mouth
- Local to damp forest and woodland. PlantNET says it can be "sometimes weedy" because it spreads, but it's a great groundcover to keep

REMOVE · weed

Trad *Tradescantia fluminensis*



Photo: Harry Rose (CC0, iNaturalist)

- **White** 3-petaled flowers with fluffy white hairs in the middle (on the stamens)
- Shinier, broader leaves (1–2.5 cm wide) on juicy stems that swell at the joints
- Forms dense, smothering mats in shade
- From South America; regrows from the tiniest bits

THE QUICK TELL

Blue flower = keep. White flower = trad. No flowers? Native *Oplismenus* grasses can look like trad too, so wait for flowers or ask me before pulling.

PAIR 2

KEEP · local native

Weeping grass *Microlaena stipoides*



Photo: guymer, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- Slender, tufted grass to 0.7 m
- Delicate seed heads 7–17 cm that **droop or "weep"**, with long, fine bristles
- Flowers most of the year
- Local native, and my top pick for a native lawn in the shade

REMOVE · weed

Panic veldtgrass *Ehrharta erecta*



Photo: Jon Sullivan, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- Tufted, soft, bright green grass to 0.6 m
- Broad, floppy leaves 2–15 mm wide
- Seed head **stands upright**, open and bristle-free
- South African weed of moist, shady sites

THE QUICK TELL

Nodding, bristly seed heads = keep. Upright, open, bristle-free seed heads = veldtgrass.



PAIR 3

KEEP · local native

Native raspberry *Rubus parvifolius*



Photo: Ian Rainbow, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- Low scrambling shrub, stems to about 1 m
- Mostly 3 (sometimes 5) small leaflets, 1–4 cm, wrinkly on top and **white and woolly underneath**
- Small **pink to red** petals
- Ripe fruit **red**, about 10 mm across

REMOVE · weed

Blackberry *Rubus fruticosus* agg.



Photo: smathichong, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- Big, arching, prickly canes forming thickets
- Leaves of 3–5 larger toothed leaflets
- **White or pink** flowers 2–3 cm across
- Berries ripen from red to **shiny black**. A State priority weed

THE QUICK TELL

Ripe red fruit and small pink flowers = native raspberry. Ripe black fruit and big flowers = blackberry.

PAIR 4

KEEP · local native

Wonga wonga vine *Pandorea pandorana*

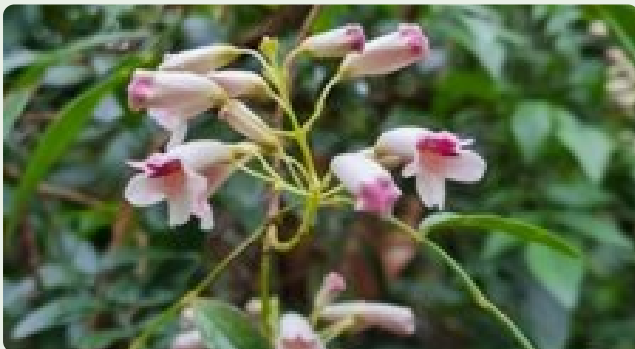


Photo: Ian Rainbow, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- Woody climber; leaves have **3–9 leaflets** (young plants: 8–17 small toothed leaflets)
- Clusters of small tubular flowers 1–2.5 cm, **whitish**, often with purple blotches or stripes in the throat
- Flowers June–December
- Local to damp gullies and rocky spots

REMOVE · weed

Cat's claw creeper *Dolichandra unguis-cati*



Photo: Greg Tasney, CC BY-SA (iNaturalist)

- Leaves of just **2 leaflets** with a 3-pronged, **claw-like tendril** between them
- Big **yellow** trumpet flowers 4–8 cm in spring
- Carpets the ground and climbs trees; masses of tubers
- A State priority weed, and officially listed as a key threat to NSW nature

THE QUICK TELL

Count the leaflets. Two leaflets plus a claw = cat's claw. Three or more leaflets and no claws = wonga vine.



PAIR 5

KEEP · local native

Old man's beard *Clematis aristata*



Photo: Sockrosma, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- Strong climber to 6 m in damp, sheltered spots
- Leaves mostly of **3 leaflets**, usually toothed
- **White star-like flowers**, usually Sept–Dec
- Followed by **fluffy, feathery seed heads** (the "beard")

REMOVE · weed

Jasmine & Japanese honeysuckle *Jasminum*

polyanthum, Lonicera japonica



Jasmine · Photo: Bryce Watts-Parker, CC BY (iNaturalist)



Japanese honeysuckle · Photo: Caleb Catto, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- **Jasmine:** leaves of 5–9 leaflets; scented flowers white on top, **pink underneath**
- **Japanese honeysuckle:** simple oval leaves in opposite pairs; paired, two-lipped white flowers that **age to yellow**; black berries
- Both smother shrubs and small trees

THE QUICK TELL

Three toothed leaflets and fluffy seed heads = native clematis. Pink buds or yellowing paired flowers = weed.

PAIR 6

KEEP · local native

Sweet sarsaparilla *Smilax glycyphylla*



Photo: ronavery, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- Light climber to about 5 m, **not prickly**
- Lance-shaped leaves 4–10 cm with **3 prominent veins**, pale and whitish underneath
- Climbs with **coiling tendrils**
- Shiny black berries 5–8 mm

REMOVE · weed

Madeira vine *Anredera cordifolia*



Photo: Will Cornwell, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- **Fleshy**, bright green, heart-shaped leaves
- Knobbly **potato-like tubers** hanging along the stems
- Drooping spikes of fragrant cream flowers in late summer–autumn
- State priority weed; tubers fall and regrow

THE QUICK TELL

Three parallel veins and tendrils = native. **Fleshy leaves and tubers on the stems = Madeira vine.** Name trap: "false sarsaparilla" is another name for the native purple coral pea, *Hardenbergia violacea*.



PAIR 7

KEEP · local native

Wombat berry *Eustrephus latifolius*



Photo: Greg Tasney, CC BY-SA (iNaturalist)

- Light vine to 6 m
- Leaves 3–10 cm, dull on both sides, with **all veins equally distinct**
- Small pink, mauve or white flowers, spring–summer
- Round **orange** fruit 10–20 mm that splits to show black seeds, each with a white fleshy coat

REMOVE · weed

Bridal creeper *Asparagus asparagoides*



Photo: Carl Ramirez, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- **Shiny**, oval "leaves" on wiry stems (they're really flattened stems)
- Scented greenish-white flowers, late winter–early spring
- **Red** berries; thick mat of tubers below
- Grows in autumn–winter, dies back in summer

THE QUICK TELL

Orange fruit = wombat berry. Red berries and glossy winter growth = bridal creeper. The native scrambling lily looks similar too: it has one strong vein down the middle of the leaf and black fruit.

PAIR 8

KEEP · local native

Milk vine *Marsdenia rostrata*



Photo: Greg Tasney, CC BY-SA (iNaturalist)

- Twining vine of moist, shady forest
- Leaves **shiny on top**, pale green underneath
- **Smaller, creamy** flowers
- **Long, narrow** seed pods

REMOVE · weed

Moth vine *Araujia sericifera*



Photo: Caleb Catto, CC BY (iNaturalist)

- Dull, grey-green, **arrow-shaped** leathery leaves, whitish underneath
- Larger creamy-white to pink tubular flowers, Nov–March
- Big **choko-like** pods 6–10 cm
- Milky sap; poisonous, so wear gloves

THE QUICK TELL

Choko-shaped pods = moth vine. Native silkpods (*Parsonsia*) also look similar: small yellow flowers and cigar-shaped pods.

Small natives worth keeping

These little guys get weeded out of North Shore lawns and garden beds all the time. All are native to the Sydney area.



Photo: Greg Tasney, CC BY-SA (iNaturalist)

Creeping beard grass

Oplismenus imbecillis

Weak, trailing grass to 0.3 m with soft leaves up to 7 mm wide; grows in shady forest. WeedWise notes it can look like trad when not flowering. A soft native "lawn" under trees.



Photo: Josh, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Kidney weed

Dichondra repens

Creeping, with kidney-shaped leaves 5–25 mm and tiny greenish-yellow flowers. PlantNET even calls it a "weed of lawns", but it is native and makes a lawn alternative for low-traffic areas.



Photo: grampianshiker, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Native violet

Viola hederacea

Tufts of kidney-shaped to round leaves; mauve-and-white flowers in spring and summer; sheltered, moist spots. Note: the vigorous coastal violet sold in nurseries is often *Viola banksii*.



Photo: Matt Berger, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Swamp pennywort

Centella asiatica

Creeping plant that roots as it goes; rounded leaves 1–4 cm on long stalks; tiny pink, purple or white flowers. Grows in damp places. Great for soggy spots.



Photo: Michael Fox, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Native geranium

Geranium solanderi

Hairy, deeply lobed, round leaves; small pink flowers, often with yellowish veins. A close relative, *G. homeanum*, has smaller pink-to-white flowers. Both are local.



Photo: Lucas Christofides, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Pastel flower

Pseuderanthemum variabile

Small herb 15–30 cm for shade; white to mauve flowers Dec–May; leaves sometimes purple underneath. Self-seeds, and feeds the caterpillars of the Varied Eggfly and Leafwing butterflies.



Photo: Scott W. Gavins, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Coffee bush

Breynia oblongifolia

Shrub to 3 m. WeedWise notes cassia can look like it, but coffee bush has single leaves (not split into leaflets) that alternate up the stem, and round berries. Birds eat the berries; grass-yellow butterflies breed on it.

Rule of thumb

Small, soft plants that pop up in shady beds and lawns are often natives finding their way home. Before you spray or pull a patch:

- ✓ leave a test corner to flower
- ✓ photograph a flower and a leaf
- ✓ ask me at your next visit

If it turns out to be native: congratulations, free groundcover!

The honest grey areas

Not everything is black and white. Here are two plants people ask me about all the time.

NATIVE · BUT CAN BE WEEDY

Sweet pittosporum

Pittosporum undulatum



Photo: Zoltán Stekkelpak (CC0, iNaturalist)

What it is: a tall shrub or tree to 15 m, with glossy, wavy-edged leaves 6–15 cm, fragrant cream flowers in spring and orange-brown capsules full of red-brown seeds.

The catch: it truly is native to the North Shore and part of our local forests. But PlantNET says it moves in aggressively after fire, and "in the Sydney district it can be a troublesome invader in disturbed sclerophyll forest" (our typical gum-tree bush). So it can crowd in where bushland has been disturbed, and councils note it as invasive outside its natural home. It has also gone wild in places it never grew, such as Lord Howe Island.

My advice:

- ✓ An established tree is fine to keep, and gives dense shelter for small birds.
- ✓ I don't plant new ones next to bushland.
- ✓ Pull seedlings where they're crowding other natives.
- ✓ It's a native tree, so council tree rules apply to larger specimens.

MYTH CHECK

"Is my fishbone fern the native one?"



Fishbone fern: remove · Photo: Alesha Teitzel, CC BY (iNaturalist)



Prickly rasp fern: local native · Photo: Jean-Paul Boerekamps (CC0, iNaturalist)

Short answer: on the North Shore, almost certainly not.

PlantNET treats fishbone fern (*Nephrolepis cordifolia*) as native in NSW only **north of the Clarence River** (far north coast). Around Sydney it's listed as a garden escape that has "escaped and established in the Sydney area". No *Nephrolepis* fern is native to the Sydney region.

You may hear that there is a "native" fishbone you should keep. The fern sold as 'Kimberley Queen' (*N. obliterated*) is Australian, but from tropical northern Australia, and has no entry in the NSW Flora. Boston fern (*N. exaltata*) comes from overseas. Experts still argue about how to name and group these ferns, but for a North Shore garden the answer is the same.

My advice: remove fishbone fern (dig out the runners and tubers; see my *Weeds to Worry About* booklet) and replace with local ferns:

- ✓ Prickly rasp fern (*Doodia aspera*)
- ✓ Gristle fern (*Blechnum cartilagineum*)
- ✓ Common maidenhair (*Adiantum aethiopicum*)
- ✓ Rainbow fern (*Calochlaena dubia*): vigorous, for bigger spaces

Did you know? "Australian native" doesn't always mean "local". Umbrella tree (from North Queensland) is treated as an environmental weed in NSW. Some wattles from other regions, such as Cootamundra wattle, are on council lists of unwanted trees. For gardens next to bushland, I choose plants local to your own soil type.

Sources: PlantNET: *Pittosporum undulatum*, *Nephrolepis cordifolia* (revised 2017), *N. obliterated* & *N. exaltata* (no NSW Flora entry); NSW WeedWise (umbrella tree); RF Horticulture native-plants list.



How to check a plant yourself

- ✓ **PlantNET** (plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au): the official list of NSW plants. Search the name to see whether it's native and where it grows. An asterisk (*) next to a region means it was brought in from elsewhere and has gone wild ("naturalised").
- ✓ **NSW WeedWise** (weeds.dpi.nsw.gov.au): weed profiles, including a "similar looking plants" section for many weeds.
- ✓ **iNaturalist** (inaturalist.org): upload a photo for suggested IDs and community confirmation.
- ✓ **Hornsby Shire Council, "Native and Weed Look-Alikes"**: a council booklet with 100+ pairs (search the council website).
- ✓ **Ask me**. Send a clear photo of the flower, a leaf (both sides) and the whole plant.

Sources

- PlantNET, NSW Flora Online, species pages for all native and weed species named (accessed October 2026).
- NSW DPI WeedWise species profiles: trad, panic veldtgrass, blackberry, cat's claw creeper, jasmine, Japanese honeysuckle, Madeira vine, bridal creeper, moth vine, cassia, umbrella tree.
- Hornsby Shire Council, "Native and Weed Look-Alikes" (further reading).
- RF Horticulture native-plants list (community and butterfly-host notes compiled from NSW Scientific Committee determinations, council fact sheets and PlantNET).

✓ Do this

- Wait for flowers or fruit
- Photograph a flower and a leaf
- Leave a test corner to grow

✗ Not that

- Spray a whole patch blind
- Pull what you can't name
- Assume "spreads" means "weed"

Not sure what's in your garden?

Book a **Native Garden Walk**: about 1 to 2 hours in your garden with me, then an emailed shortlist of 10–15 local plants within 48 hours. Bring all your "is this a weed?" questions! Book your next job with me within 60 days and the full Walk fee comes off it (one credit per property). Prices and details: "Native garden advice" on my website.

0481 106 188

rhorticulture@outlook.com

Photo credits

Photos are used under the licences shown (CC0, CC BY 4.0, CC BY-SA 4.0; licence texts at creativecommons.org). Some photos are cropped or resized. Photos marked CC BY-SA (including my cropped versions) remain under CC BY-SA 4.0 and may be reused under that licence; the licence covers those photos only, not the rest of this handout. Photographers, iNaturalist and Wikimedia do not endorse RF Horticulture.

- *Anredera cordifolia*: Will Cornwell, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/76454985>
- *Araujia sericifera*: Caleb Catto, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/270182408>
- *Asparagus asparagoides*: Carl Ramirez, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/368001942>
- *Breynia oblongifolia*: Scott W. Gavins, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/316466430>
- *Centella asiatica*: Matt Berger, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/326371331>
- *Clematis aristata*: Sockrosma, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/231571004>
- *Commelina cyanea*: Richard Fuller, CC0, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/160228734>
- *Dichondra repens*: Josh, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/232457168>
- *Dolichandra unguis-cati*: Greg Tasney, CC BY-SA, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/260935051>
- *Doodia aspera*: Jean-Paul Boerekamps, CC0, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/299828090>
- *Ehrharta erecta*: Jon Sullivan, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/240104823>
- *Eustrephus latifolius*: Greg Tasney, CC BY-SA, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/260935054>
- *Geranium solanderi*: Michael Fox, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/65462729>
- *Jasminum polyanthum*: Bryce Watts-Parker, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/316223727>
- *Lonicera japonica*: Caleb Catto, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/270157157>
- *Marsdenia rostrata*: Greg Tasney, CC BY-SA, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/146493492>
- *Microlaena stipoides*: guymr, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/47482358>
- *Nephrolepis cordifolia*: Alesha Teitzel, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/250067754>
- *Oplismenus imbecillis*: Greg Tasney, CC BY-SA, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/82817110>
- *Pandorea pandorana*: Ian Rainbow, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/93566927>
- *Pittosporum undulatum*: Zoltán Stekkelpak, CC0, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/203566689>
- *Pseuderanthemum variabile*: Lucas Christofides, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/270773798>
- *Rubus fruticosus* agg. (iNaturalist name: *Rubus grabowskii*): smathichong, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/332438597>
- *Rubus parvifolius*: Ian Rainbow, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/69431616>
- *Smilax glycyphylla*: ronavery, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/263598527>
- *Tradescantia fluminensis*: Harry Rose, CC0, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/398977377>
- *Viola hederacea*: grampianshiker, CC BY, iNaturalist, <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/302347782>