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Plant-Life Dispute Blooms at Airport; Environmentalist Sees Exotic Plants at LAX as Threat to Survival of Endangered Butterfly

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Environmentalist Jon Earl and a cadre of other volunteers spent thousands of backbreaking hours at a Los Angeles International Airport-owned nature preserve plucking out plants that threaten the endangered El Segundo blue butterfly.

That is why Earl was so dismayed recently to see some of the very same orange and purple blooms that he and others worked so hard to remove blossoming just across the street on other LAX property.

"It was shocking to me that they would plant some of the very plants we removed from the dunes," said Earl, director of Rhapsody in Green, a volunteer group that has helped restore the El Segundo Sand Dunes. "Let's just see how long it will take for these plants to wreck the dunes and meadow."

The plants, all exotic varieties, easily reseed themselves and can force out the native coastal buckwheat that the butterfly depends on for its survival.

Earl and other environmentalists say the airport's landscaping decisions raise questions about its commitment to preserve the habitat. But airport officials say they have gone "above and beyond" what is required to protect the butterfly.

The plants that have drawn such protest include gazanias, a dense ground cover with large daisy-like flowers; sea lavender, a cluster of small purple flowers on stalks; and myoporum, a fast-growing coastal tree from Australia. They were planted in November along the northeast corner of Imperial Highway and Pershing Drive in a large scenic area surrounding the airport's fire drill site.

The Westchester Parkway, which begins at the northernmost end of the butterfly preserve and extends east for 2 1/4 miles, was also planted with gazanias and sea lavender about a year and a half ago.

The flowers are not nearly as destructive to the butterfly as ice plant or acacias, which are hosts to the butterfly's predators and which appear in a dense thicket across from the habitat at World Way West.

But the plants nevertheless produce massive amounts of seeds which can easily blow across the highway and sprout in the butterfly preserve. Once established, the exotic plants tend to overtake coastal buckwheat, the butterfly's sole food source, horticulturists say.

"Those plants propagate very well and pop up all over the place," said botanist Angelika Brinkmann-Busi of the California Native Plant Society's South Coast chapter. "They can make such dense patches that they overcrowd the natives."

Airport officials say they did not know the plants could be harmful, even though one of their own reports contains strong recommendations against planting exotics near the sand dunes. They say the airport has paid a lot of money to preserve the sand dunes and currently devotes two full-time gardeners to its upkeep.

"We're taking care of the (dunes) restoration area--we're going above and beyond what's required," said airport spokeswoman Cora Fossett. "And here these people are complaining about what's going on across the street. Where does it end?"

She and other airport officials said the city, not the airport, approved the controversial landscaping plans. But city officials insist it is the Department of Airports' responsibility to select any plants that are to be installed on airport property.

being, which is operating an airport."

PHOTO: COLOR, Environmentalist Jon Earl with sea lavender planted on Los Angeles International Airport land.

PHOTOGRAPHER: JONATHAN ALCORN / For The Times

PHOTO: COLOR, Below, primroses, which are native to the dunes area near LAX.

PHOTOGRAPHER: JONATHAN ALCORN / For The Times

PHOTO: COLOR, The El Segundo blue butterfly, a resident of the dunes near LAX.

PHOTOGRAPHER: SUZANNE STATES / For The Times

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