

Volunteer doesn't let the grass grow under his feet

AN 'unemployed botanist' has become one of CALM's treasures by identifying and illustrating 84 species of Wheatbelt grasses in a new book.

Alex Williams, formerly of the Atomic Energy Commission at Lucas Heights in NSW, describes himself as an unemployed botanist but works zealously as a CALM Herbarium volunteer three days a week.

His book *An Illustrated Key to the Perennial Grasses of the Avon Wheatbelt* is a partial update of an edition published more than 50 years ago by the then Government botanist, Charles Gardner.

"Grasses are notoriously difficult to identify because they have no colourful flowers or distinctive features obvious to the untrained eye by which to identify them," Alex said.

by Sue McKenna

"The flowers are so small and specialised that you can't see them with the naked eye.

"What I've done is to illustrate each step in the key so that people who need to identify them can easily distinguish and classify them."

His book is the first to combine illustrations with words instead of the traditional written key, and is designed for use by herbarium volunteers, farmers, shires and land care groups. It also gives the grasses common names as well as their scientific names, and names that have been changed since Gardner's time.

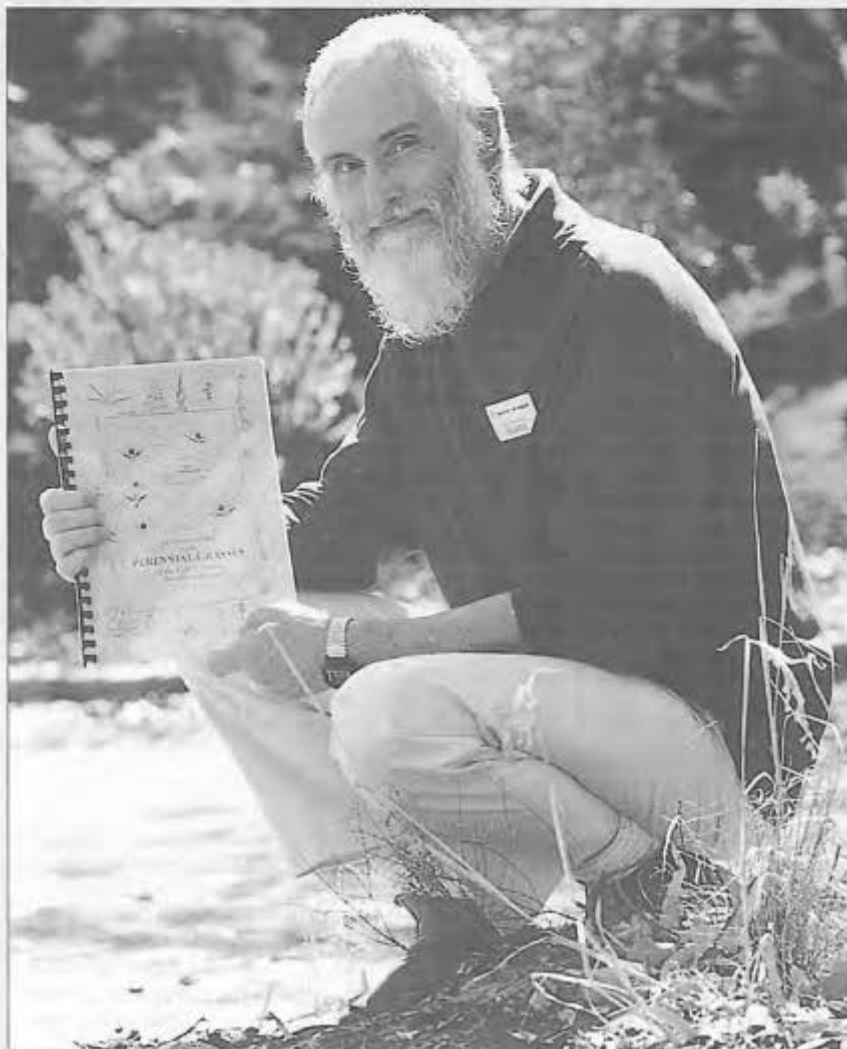
Alex started working at CALM by coincidence two years ago when he drove a disabled volunteer to the

Kensington herbarium and was invited to join them. His career as a botanical researcher, an environmental delegate to the United Nations, an author of two books on the environmental impact of uranium mining and seven years of missionary work had ended because of chronic fatigue syndrome.

The rest is history: Alex's fascination and expertise with flora saw him donate his skills to CALM and the people of WA.

"I value the work I do for CALM very much, and I enjoy it because it's wonderful to come to work and be appreciated for your knowledge," he said.

His next step is to produce a similar book on the 347 grass species in WA's south-west.



Alex Williams and his book. Photo by Norm Bailey

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