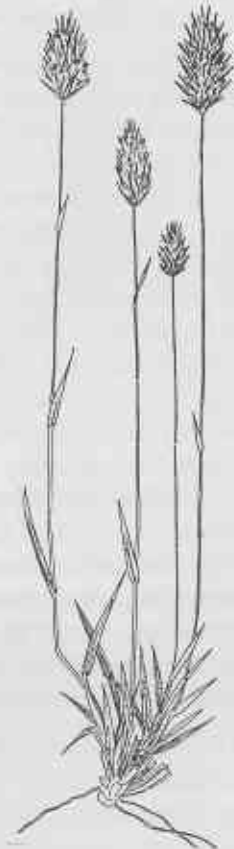


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NATIVE grasses were the backbone of our early grazing industries - yet today most people cannot distinguish them from the weed grasses that dominate a grazed bushland.



Neurachne allopecuroidea

While southwestern WA does not have extensive grasslands such as the basalt plains of Victoria, our native grasses can be found peppered throughout our bushland and are a major food source for mammals and ants. Their often tussocky nature makes good habitat for lizards and other small creatures.

Most of our native grasses are perennials and some could be incorporated into mixed permanent pastures within our farming systems, however a major constraint is the lack of local seed sources. There is much work to be done in selecting and bulking up the seed of our local grasses. Learning to recognise them is the first step in this process.

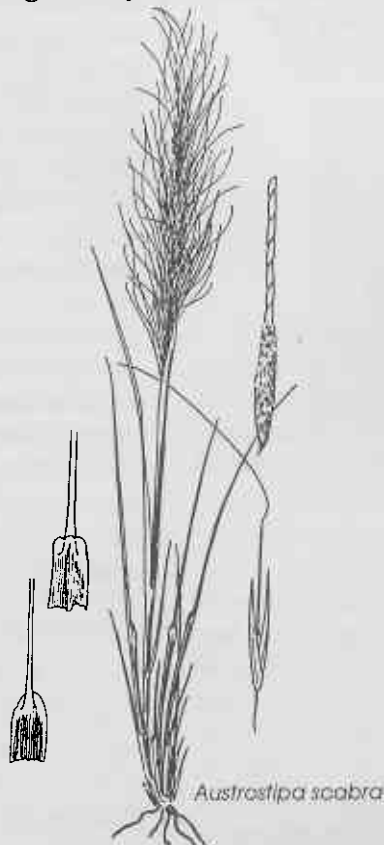
NATIVE GRASSES - THE UNSUNG HEROES

by Terry Macfarlane
and Avril Baxter

The major groups of grasses are easily identified by their distinctive seed heads. Some of the major groups, found throughout the landscape, include:

Fox Tail Mulga Grass (*Neurachne allopecuroidea*)

The leaves of this clumping grass are flat and dark green with large, widely spaced hairs on the edges. The seed head is very compact, resembling *Phalaris* (Canary grass) except that it has a slightly greyish colouring. This grass is very common and present in most bushland in south western WA, and it is grazed by animals.



Austrostipa scabra



Austrodanthonia bipartita

Spear grasses (*Austrostipa species*)

Here, a sharply pointed seed is attached to a long shaft or bristle which curls and twists as the seed matures. The seed head can either be dense and compact (as wheat is) or loose and branched, like oats. There are a number of species in south western WA, occurring in most bushland areas. They range from a couple of annual species present after a fire, to tufted perennials, one semi-climber and a couple of species that inhabit damp and somewhat saline places. They are known to be palatable to grazing animals, but the sharp seeds are a problem in spring.

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Wallaby grasses (*Austrodanthonia species*)

These small tufted grasses can tolerate quite tough conditions, being often seen on roadsides, but also in bush. Their leaves can be either flat or rather fine. The seed heads are compact and resemble those of wild oats, when the seeds have fallen. The seeds themselves have very short bristles and can be instantly recognised by the distinct rows of hairs across them when viewed with a magnifying glass.



Microlaena stipoides

Weeping Rice Grass (*Microlaena stipoides*)

With its wide, flat and soft-looking leaves, this grass may look somewhat delicate, but it is in fact quite tough. It occurs mainly in forest and higher rainfall wheatbelt areas. Under intensive grazing in bushland areas it forms a dense pasture or lawn-like cover. The seed head is slender and the seeds bear a straight bristle, which is not very troublesome. There is probably considerable scope for selecting useful variants of this grass.



Poa drummondiana

Forest poa (*Poa porphyroclados*)

A large bunch grass that is common in coastal areas and high rainfall forest. It has a large amount of rather soft leaf material and loose seed heads. The seeds are small and have no bristles. In suitable areas this species would probably grow very densely and productively.

Terry Macfarlane is a Senior Research Scientist at CALM, Manjimup. His special interest is grasses. He can be contacted on 9771 7980. Avril Baxter is Land for Wildlife Officer at CALM Narrogin, phone 9881 3297.

Besides Avril and Terry, some West Australians with an active interest in native grasses include:

- Una Bell, bush regenerator, Mundaring, 9295 1668
- Roy Butler, AgWA, Merredin 9081 3111
- Don Cochrane, farmer, Duranillin 9334 0336
- Jenny Dewing, LFW Officer, Bridgetown 9761 2318
- Penny Hussey, LFW, Perth 9334 0530
- Richard McLellan, Landcare Services Pty Ltd, York 9641 4064
- Paul Sandford, AgWA Albany 9892 8444
- Dave Stapleton, Bushcare Support Officer, Wagin 9823 1661

Illustrations by CA Gardner from 'Flora of Western Australia', Vol 1, Part 1. Govt Printer, Perth, 1952.



Would you like to arrange a Field Walk to learn to distinguish between native and introduced grasses? If you can collect together a group of interested people, and a suitable site, contact your local LFW Officer to set a date for next growing season - October or early November are the best months. - Ed.