

WEEDS

VELD GRASS – FRIEND OR FOE?

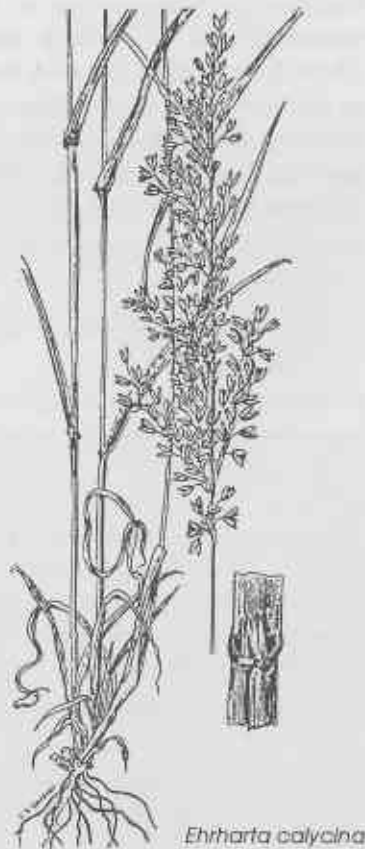
by Bob Dixon

VELD Grass comes from South Africa. In 1924 it was growing well on sandy soil in Crawley - possibly seed originally got there from packing material blown from barges or lorries between Fremantle and Perth. A Western Mail article on 14/05/1925 said that 'Veld Grass has spread into the park (Kings Park) and there must be a quarter of an acre where it is quite thick, growing amongst the shrubs and harsh vegetation'.

Originally seen as the answer to solving the problem of supplying a reliable fodder crop, Veld Grass was keenly sought after by the farming community. It didn't take long for Kings Park to take advantage of this 'new found crop' which had the potential to make money for the park. Veld Grass was supplied to the Peel Estate in 1926.

In 1927 it was acknowledged this was certainly a grass that can establish itself in the poorest of sand west of Kings Park amongst the harsh vegetation and was worth watching - and distributing. Mr J. Heath, Superintendent of Kings Park, had also become interested, and having satisfied himself that the grass was good he went forth preaching, ultimately converting the Controller of Group Settlements and officers of the Department of Agriculture. Mr Heath let it be known that the grass was available at £1 a bag and that orders have been received for roots from all over the state south of Geraldton, also from South Australia and Victoria.

Veld Grass was advertised for sale in the Sunday Times on 18/02/1927 at £1 a bag. During the same year the grass was being ploughed and superphosphate applied to try and improve yields. Not all soils were suited to growing this grass and in 1927 it was noted in the West Australian that although perennial

*Eriharta calycina*

Veld Grass was in East Guildford in 1900, it did not make much progress on heavy soils.

In 1927 Kings Park was awarded a prize at the Royal Show for the best 14 lb sheath of Veld Grass. During the mid 1920s the sale of Veld Grass made a significant contribution to funding the park's operating costs. Therefore protecting the Veld Grass from fire received the highest priority, rather than lose next year's income!

However, there was great concern, even in the early 1930s, that this grass was out-competing native flora in Kings Park and calls for its removal were seen in local newspapers. At the same time, others were still actively promoting its use as a fodder crop.

In 1933 Veld Grass was pulled out from Subiaco to Crawley, from along Lovekin Drive and the river frontage. Veld Grass was by then

considered to be a fire hazard. Pulling out Veld Grass became a regular event throughout the 1930s, to reduce the fire hazard and limit its spread in the park. In 1938 £65, a large sum of money at the time, was spent to try and stop it from spreading away from the southern end of the park where it was already well established and beyond eradication by these means.

Kings Park is fortunate in having reliable records on Veld Grass spread. In 1939 it first appeared in Alison Baird's (UWA Botany Dept) quadrats. A distribution map of the park also clearly illustrates the rapid spread of Veld Grass in the southern end of the park from Crawley almost to the adventure playground. The spread was favoured by cultivation along road verges and disturbance by fire. By 1945 it had spread through most of the park, though very patchy in places. Baird's quadrats in 1950, compared to the 1939 ones, also confirm Veld Grass had rapidly invaded the park's bushland.

In 1947 R. C. Rossiter reported on research work with Veld Grass. His findings included:- heavy continuous grazing could eliminate Veld Grass; there were 3 distinctive forms; seed set was very low; and, it was difficult to collect as it shattered as soon as it was mature. However, there was a form that did not shatter and this should be used to improve pasture crops

Desperate to control the grass in the park, all sorts of suggestions were made, including reducing fire frequency, replanting trees to improve the canopy (shade) and even grazing with cattle! In the mid 1950s the YMCA organised volunteers to pull the Veld Grass from around the memorial trees along the park roads. These efforts were conducted over whole weekends and were supported by

firms such as Peters and Weaver & Lock, who provided refreshments for the volunteers. Unfortunately nothing seemed to solve the problem, they were fighting a losing battle as there was a large seedbank in the soil and new plants soon reappeared.

In 1971 herbicide trials using non-selective herbicides gave some control of Veld Grass but also damaged native plants. Therefore the results were never implemented into a control programme.

It was not until 1985 a suitable selective herbicide was trialed in Kings Park bushland. Starting with Fusilade and Sertin, extensive trials were carried out in areas with different management regimes and Veld Grass densities. In all cases the herbicides worked selectively killing Veld Grass without killing the non-target native plants. After these successful trials a 1 ha plot was sprayed in 1986 to see what it would be like implementing a large-

scale spraying programme. This, and later research using Assure and Targa, was the start of the modern control methods used today in remnant bushland. Misting behind a tractor was also tried for a number of years. However, due to the cost of large numbers of staff, which were required to effectively keep the general public out of the area, this practice was discontinued.

Kings Park continues to use Fusilade® (the only herbicide registered for the control of Veld Grass in remnant bushland) generally applied by spraying contractors. As a leading agency in bushland management and environmental weed control we provide advice to other land managers on how to effectively control one of our worst environmental weeds.

The author would like to thank Dr P Wycherley for his assistance with historic information.

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We have been having a debate - how should the common name be spelt, 'veld' or 'veldt'? Are there any Afrikaans speakers among us? Which is correct?
- Ed.