

REVEGETATION

THE VALUE
OF
PRICKLES

Rosemary Jasper

PRICKLY plants are common in south-western Australia and while they may not be endearing to humans who want to walk through the bush, they can have significant value in revegetation. The following example is an illustration of the type of benefit they can provide.

On our bush property near Ravensthorpe, there is one area that has been cleared in the past (within the last 30 years) but which is now being recolonised gradually by a variety of native species. There are very few introduced plants, but in parts of the area there are still only annual native herbs or native grasses, whereas originally there would have been a dense cover of small trees and shrubs as well. One small 'shrub' that is a feature of the area however is the low-growing, prickly wattle, *Acacia acanthoclada* subsp. *acanthoclada* (Harrow Wattle). This plant is growing here to about 30 cm high, and has rigid fine spines at the end of each branchlet, making it a very prickly plant, with a well-deserved common name.

Although I do not find this *Acacia* a natural favourite, it appears to be serving a very useful function in the regeneration of this area. The photograph shows a typical patch of *Acacia acanthoclada*. The patch, made up of several individual plants, is about 4 sq. metres in area and only 20 - 30 cm high, and it forms a dense prickly mat of vegetation. Growing up through this apparently inhospitable tangle are some young *Allocasuarina huegeliana* (Rock Sheoak). There are 11 Rock Sheoaks in this small patch and they vary in height between 25 cm and 1 metre.



Acacia acanthoclada patch with sheoak seedlings

These plants show no signs of having been grazed even though rabbits and kangaroos use the area and are known to favour *Allocasuarina* sp. There are no young sheoaks growing in the open ground in this vicinity. I assume that the wattle has afforded the young sheoaks protection from grazing and allowed them to become established in the area.

Harrow Wattle itself may be short lived, because many of the patches have sections that are dead, but even so the framework of dead branches and spines continues to provide a very prickly habitat. There is also a noticeable spread of the plant with small plants of a variety of ages growing on the periphery of each of the mature patches. This species therefore appears to be a very successful coloniser in this situation. It has required no soil disturbance or fire for the seeds to germinate and the young seedlings have been left alone by grazers.

But this story doesn't stop with plants. In the patch shown in the photograph, there is also an active Tawny Crowned Honeyeater's nest. This was a very exciting discovery and illustrates the possible protection value of prickly plants for animals as well.



This all suggests that if you are planning some revegetation, look around the bush in your area for prickly plants that could be expected to protect other plants and also animals from grazing and predation and include them in the revegetation species list. If the plants are themselves good colonisers then so much the better.

Rosemary Jasper is LFWO at Ravensthorpe.