

FLORA

NOTES ON GROWING NATIVE GRASSES: PT 2

Una Bell

Many native grasses are easy to grow – the hard part is probably recognising the native grasses! Knowing a few basic things about the type of grass you want to propagate can really help your success rate. A few simple questions to ask yourself are: Is this grass annual or perennial? Summer-active or winter-active? What type of soil does it normally grow in? Does it grow in wet or damp areas, or prefer drier sites? Does it have above-ground runners (stolons) or rhizomes?

The following native grasses are all species that I have managed to grow, and I am not a great gardener! Many of these grasses can be used for revegetation, although not all are pasture grasses. A lot of native grass seed is usually kept for a year to overcome dormancy problems. If growing from seed, use a shallow planting depth.

Swamp Wallaby Grass (*Amphibromus nervosus*)



Perennial winter-active clumps; collect seed in spring to summer, seeds tend to fall quickly as they mature and seem to have a six-month dormancy period. Sow in autumn, spring or even summer as it can germinate in hot weather but plants need to be kept moist. Grows on flood plains and in winter-wet depressions and copes with seasonal inundation. Will grow in bog gardens, use for rehabilitation of wetland areas and it is also a native pasture grass.

Graceful Speargrass (*Austrostipa acrociliata*)



Perennial, winter-active large clumps. Floret has only a small hard tip, whereas most speargrasses have a hard tip which makes them difficult with stock. It grows in coastal and inland sandy soils, common around Hopetoun and also collected in the wheatbelt. Possible agricultural use for grazing, landcare and soil stabilisation.

Feather Speargrass (*Austrostipa elegantissima*)



Perennial winter-active clump with large, attractive, feathery panicles that break off and blow away when mature. Flowers spring to early summer. Collect the whole panicle for the seed which is on the end of the panicle branches. Widespread, it grows in a range of soil types, including the edges of salt lakes. Use for native gardens, rehabilitation and possibly agriculture, as it is a tough, if somewhat unconventional looking, grass which is usually grazed out if stock or rabbits are present.

Silkyheads or Native Lemon Grass (*Cymbopogon oblectus*)



Perennial summer-active clump, leaves are blue-green and lemon scented when crushed. Inflorescence has leaf-like bracts (spathes) that go from green to rusty brown when mature. Florets are soft, white and fluffy. Grows easily from seed and does not seem to have a dormancy period. Prefers heavy red soils such as in the Avon Valley and rocky outcrops such as along the Darling Scarp. Use for native gardens and, if already present in the local area, for rehabilitation but it is not useful for pasture as stock dislike the lemony smell/taste. Under conditions of summer watering, it can be invasive.

Clustered Lovegrass or Lavender Grass (*Eragrostis elongata*)



Perennial summer-active clump, flowering stems carry attractive purple clusters from spring to autumn. Seed can have a dormancy period and is very small – like dust – so collect whole seedheads when they have matured and gone grey-brown. Crush seedheads over the surface of potting mix or where direct seeding, or throw down whole mature seedheads into damp areas. Germinates in late summer.

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Grows in or near seasonally wet areas such as wetlands and roadside drains and copes with dying out in summer once established. Good for rehabilitation, but may only live for five years. Use in damp areas or bog gardens. Looks very attractive when grown with Knotted Club Rush (*Ficinia nodosa*) as both have clusters along the stem.

Matgrass (*Hemarthria uncinata*)



Perennial summer-active spreading grass which grows along creeklines and other damp areas and likes shade. It can be confused with Kikuyu Grass (*Pennisetum clandestinum*) but Matgrass has a smooth, hairless,

thinner leaf and a distinctive inflorescence. Do not attempt to collect seed – it is best propagated from rhizomes or stolons. Use for rehabilitation of wetlands and in bog gardens, where it will need space to spread. Good frog habitat.

Blowngrass (*Lachnograstis filiformis*)



Annual or short-lived perennial clump, winter-active, which produces plenty of tiny seeds with a high germination rate. Collect panicles when mature and spread on rehabilitation site. It often appears on wetland sites of its own accord, as it likes disturbance and damp areas. Very attractive grass, some populations have a purple tint to the inflorescence. If growing in a nursery, it can spread easily!

Weeping Grass (*Microlaena stipoides*)



Perennial winter-active tufts with a strong rhizome and long flowering stems in spring. Has growth spurts in autumn and spring. Propagate from

seeds and rhizomes; established pots can be divided. Seed is mature by December, but do not clean the seed as this can damage it. While some fresh seed will germinate, it has a higher germination rate after six months. This is in keeping with the natural growth pattern, as the seed is mature in early summer and would normally germinate six months later after the first rains. It grows along creeklines and as forest understorey, often on lower slopes, and prefers shade or part-shade. Will grow under trees, including Marri. Forms open patches of native lawn along creeklines and is a native pasture grass. It is being investigated as a native grain-bearing crop.

Foxtail Mulga Grass (*Neurachne alopecuroidea*)

Perennial short grass in very low spreading clumps, with straight flowering stems topped by a grey inflorescence. It is winter-active,



but the genus is unusual in that it also includes summer-active species, and one species is both! Grows well in hotter conditions.

Widespread and versatile grass, eaten by kangaroos but most sheep do not like it. Seed matures in early summer and does not have a dormancy period but older seed may give a higher germination rate. Responds to smoke treatment but not essential. Seedlings can be very slow-growing.

Marine Couch (*Sporobolus virginicus*)



Perennial summer-active spreading grass. It is salt-tolerant and is found in estuaries, on river banks and damp areas as well as coastal dunes

and among rocks, particularly along the south coast. Has a grey-brown, spike-like inflorescence, from which the seed is rapidly shed. (*Sporobolus* means either to throw the seed like dice, or to sow a crop in a clod of earth.) Grow from rhizomes or stolons. Use for rehabilitation of brackish damp areas and it can be grazed by stock. It has even been used as a lawn where plentiful saline water was available for irrigation.

Una Bell is a volunteer Research Associate at the WA Herbarium, where she can be reached by phone, 9334 0500. Photos: U. Bell.