

Persistence pays off for serradella

DOWN TO EARTH



Bob Freebairn

LONG-term persistent, productive, great for building soil nitrogen, suited to acid as well as non-acid sandy and loam soils, non-bloating and high quality are some of the attributes of the autumn-winter-spring growing annual legume serradella.

However, careful management including selection of varieties is important for serradella to express all these glowing attributes.

Our Central West property is an example of how persistent and productive serradella can be.

It was introduced into native and

subtropical grasses, along with other legumes like sub clover by previous owners more than 25 years ago and is the dominant legume in these pastures across the range of medium loam and lighter soils.

Like all aerially seeding legumes such as medics, rose clover and serradella it is especially important to manage grazing pressure to ensure a good level of flowers and pods are not eaten off until after pods have matured.

In dry springs, like much of the last decade, and especially with sheep, scarce spring feed and hard grazing commonly result in poor seed set of species like serradella.

While hard seed levels generally ensure persistence if an occasional season of no seed set occurs (provided there is a good soil seed reservoir from previous seasons) if no seed set happens across a number of seasons' persistence is generally poor.

Aerially seeded varieties therefore commonly require light stocking in the critical flowering and seed set period in drier springs to ensure adequate seed set and a build-up of seed reserves.

Choosing varieties that flower earlier is a mechanism that helps long-term persistence should a run of dry springs be experienced.

In much of central NSW – for example, in areas like Dubbo, Trangie, Elong Elong, Baradine and Coonabarabran – trials across a number of years highlighted the outstanding persistence of the yellow serradella variety King.

Yelbini and Santorini are other generally persistent, early maturing yellow varieties. Avila, a longer season type, has done well in better rainfall areas.

While seed is difficult to come by, slender serradella varieties Jebala and McFarlane have been long-term per-

sistent on shallow soils subject to long periods of water logging.

Soft-seeded varieties of all serradella types have tended to persist poorly.

Unlike many other species early maturing serradella varieties are not necessarily penalised in production because of early seed set.

If seasonal conditions are good, or recover after a dry early spring, serradella commonly re-fires and or continues to grow until spring moves into being too hot and dry.

This past year for example, a mild wet late spring, serradella continued growing well after Christmas.

Good soil fertility is important for production and persistence of all annual legumes including serradella. Because serradella is commonly grown on low fertility soils sensible fertiliser programs are important.

Sulphur and phosphorus are nearly always the most limiting elements on many of these soils. Establishment

with seed inoculated with the correct strain of rhizobia bacteria is essential for its ability to fix nitrogen.

Like many annual legumes, serradella can tolerate a fair degree of heavy grazing except requiring extra care during the flowering period.

But like most plants production will be higher if reasonable leaf area is allowed to develop and is maintained.

A long rest period over winter-spring followed by heavy grazing of a large biomass pasture can lead to poor recovery.

It is better to aim to maintain reasonable groundcover rather than periodic crash grazing with long non-grazing periods.

■ Next week: Highlights of 30 years of Down to Earth.

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Riverina weeds in the spotlight

FOLLOWING the floods and a return to better seasons, the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) has launched an awareness campaign targeting the spread of noxious weeds.

This includes the launch of the Weeds of the Riverina booklet launched last week at the Henty Machinery Field Days.

Manager of the Eastern Riverina Noxious Weeds Authority Robert Ferguson (pictured) said it was focusing on deep rooted perennial grasses such as Coolatai and Chilean needle grass because they were difficult to recognise, as well as alligator weed.

"We're particularly concerned about aquatic weeds after recent widespread floods," he said.

He said the DPI had mapped existing populations previous to the flooding, but because the floods were so widespread and flowed into new locations, they were expecting new populations of weeds could emerge anywhere.

By increasing awareness of the potential problem he said it would help with the prevention of spread of weed populations.

Mr Ferguson said important steps in this process were early detection and identification so control measures could be instigated.

"We're basically trying to create more eyes on the ground," he said.

Therefore a large part of the program was about educating the community.

"We're more than happy to go out and identify an unusual plant for a landholder – if it's unusual to him it's important we know what it is," Mr Ferguson said.

The best way for a landholder to get help in identifying any unusual plants is to contact their local council and, if possible, get the plant identified on site.

This prevents any spread of seeds that could occur from transporting the plant.

"The genuine producer is committed to their land and are keen on weed control. Its probably newcomers and small block holders that we get a lot of enquiry from," Mr Ferguson said.

He said small block owners and absentee landowners were among the more difficult people to get the message to because of a lack of understanding of the importance of the issue.

"Most weeds officers are reluctant to move down the prosecution pathway, (and) instead are interested in weed management for the greater good," he said.

"Therefore, don't be afraid to contact your local weeds officer if you think you've got a weed – you won't get a fine."

Copies of the new booklet are available from local council.

– ANDREW NORRIS