

Rice millet vs spear grass - can you tell the difference?

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Frequently we encounter weeds that can be difficult to distinguish from native plants.

This can lead to a lack of confidence and uncertainty in our bush regeneration activities. It is easy to fall into the trap of believing you must be a botanical expert and able to quote verbatim the finest details distinguishing a weed from similar looking native plants.

Personally, I prefer to make life as simple and uncomplicated as possible. We all have enough worries in the world without having to count the hairs on the back of a leaf, determine if they have glands at the base, decide if the hairs are yellow or orange and if they have hooks or not! I just want to know if I should be removing it or admiring it. The weed grass, rice millet (*Piptatherum miliaceum*) is a case in point. When first seen, it looks very similar to some native spear grasses, particularly flat awned spear grass (*Austrostipa platychaeta*).

There are simple ways to tell the two apart and there are more complicated ways. Naturally, I choose the simple way.

Both grasses are large perennial tussock grasses with long wiry stems. Both grasses flower and produce seed at roughly the same time of year under similar conditions. They are best distinguished when flowering or setting seed.

Comparing the two it is possible to see there are substantial differences, particularly the size of the seed and length of the awn. The best time to see this is during Spring and Summer when both plants are flowering or setting seed.

The table demonstrates there are large differences between the seed and awn of each species. The seed of native spear grass is at least twice as long as the seed of the weed. The awn of the native spear grass is at least 60 times the length of the weed's awn. These are simple differences that can be seen with the naked eye. This is the simplest method of determining if you have a native spear grass or the weed, rice millet.

As you become more familiar with each species you will begin to see other

FEATURE	WEED: rice millet	NATIVE: flat awned spear grass
Height	0.5 to 1.5 metres	Up to 3m (esp. growing up through a shrub)
Leaves	1-40cm long	3-25cm long
Leaf width	1-10mm wide	1-5mm wide
Seed (lemma for the technical)	1.5-2mm long	4.5-6mm long
Seed	Short, fat, straw coloured, smooth and shiny	Long, thin, dark and a little hairy
Awn (bristle attached to seed)	3-4mm long (frequently falls off and therefore absent)	6-8cm long (always present, will not fall off)
Technical bit		
Glume	1st glume 2.5-4mm long; 2nd glume 2.5-4mm long	1st glume 8-14mm long; 2nd glume 6.5-9mm long
Ligule	0.5-1.5mm long	1-7mm long

differences. For example the panicles (seed heads) of each are very different. The weed is more dense and tends to droop.

The native's is relatively open and sparse, especially as seeds mature, and tends to be more erect.

The awns of the native grass often have a purple tinge to them when immature. As you look more closely you may detect subtle differences in leaf structure as well.

Rather than worrying about treating rice millet at other times of the year, choose to treat it when the differences are obvious. Treat it in Spring and Summer.

If you are particularly concerned about preventing additional seed production of rice millet, just cut and bag the heads, remove them from the site and dispose of them in Council kerbside collection.

If this is not possible, you could burn the heads in a wood heater or place them in a tough black plastic bag, seal it well and leave in direct sunlight to solarise for several months.

This is much easier to deal with than the accidental removal of a native grass at another time of year when differences are not as clear.

How to treat rice millet

If you are still having trouble confidently identifying rice millet ensure you seek advice from your regional co-ordinator before embarking on any removal program.

Rice millet has an extensive and pernicious root system. If you try and hand pull anything larger than a seedling of rice millet you will be requesting rapid treatment for your damaged back. I have witnessed men try and hand pull rice millet only to give up after a 'twinge' in the back. Keeping occupational health and safety matters at the fore of our minds together with minimal disturbance principles the following treatment is recommended.

Tussocks of rice millet can be cut or slashed approximately 10cm above ground. The bushcarer will need to wait 2-4 weeks for the grass to put on new lush growth. This new growth is then spot sprayed with Glyphosate.

Alternatively, rice millet can be cut and swabbed. This can be very time consuming and reduces the area of bushland that can be treated. This method would be useful when only one or two individual plants need to be treated.

Keep bushcaring simple.



Mature spear grass with long awns



Rice millet



Rice millet: drooping heads



Rice millet: no awns

New Bridal Creeper discovered

A new Western Cape form of Bridal Creeper has been confirmed at Anstey Hill in Tea Tree Gully, in Adelaide's north-east.

The new form was originally discovered last year by CSIRO and DPI Victoria weeds officer who were out releasing biological controls.

SA WoNS Weeds Management Co-ordinator Dennis Gannaway said the discovery was made because rust fungus failed to establish on the Western Cape form. A search and mapping exercise was conducted in 2005 and in total 40ha on 225 sites were discovered.

Mr Gannaway said the initial search area was in the South East of South Australia in Millicent, Donavan and Port McDonnell (a full report including distribution maps can be found at <http://www.weeds.org.au/WoNS/bridalcreeper/>), but the Anstey Hill infestation was discovered in June.

"The weed is thought to be restricted to the park and immediate surrounding vegetation. An intensive search is being conducted in September and results will be posted on the following website <http://www.weeds.org.au/WoNS/bridalcreeper/>," Mr Gannaway said.

The new Western Cape form differs with the Cladodes being darker green, with a thick leathery texture.

"They tend to be flat not slightly curved like the common form," Mr Gannaway said.

"The growth is larger and more vigorous. It is the tubers that differentiate absolutely between the two forms. The Western Cape's tuber is close to the soil surface, bigger than common form and form a rosette horizontally around the rhizome - very distinctive."

A brochure has been produced which will help to distinguish between the two species and this can be found at <http://www.weeds.org.au/WoNS/bridalcreeper/>

Thank you tree awards

Every year Trees For Life recognises members who have put in an exceptional effort towards bush management, seed collection, growing seedlings or any other activity which greatly assists Trees For Life in meeting its aims.

Anyone wishing to nominate a member for their outstanding contribution should phone Trees For Life on 8372 0150 and ask for a Thank You Tree form.

Nominations are accepted until September 30.

Please include your contact details as well as your nominee's.

2006 workshop dates

Bush For Life workshops

Auburn : Wed. September 13

Victor Harbor: Wed. Sept 20

Blewitt Springs: Wed. October 4

Belair: Sat. October 14

When booking in for workshops quote course code B1. To book in for the workshops below, you must have completed a BFL workshop.

Plant Identification

Mt Barker : Saturday, October 7

Belair: Saturday, October 21

* Please quote course codes B5 for Plant ID and B4 for Grass ID.

Grass Identification

Mt Barker : Sat. November 4

Mt Barker : Sat. November 18

Seed Collection Workshops

Pasadena: Friday, September 15

Belair Nt. Park: Wed. October 18

Athelstone: Thurs. November 23

*Please quote SW1 Group Seed Collection Days

Monarto - Wed. September 27

Springton - Wed. November 1

Strathalbyn - Thurs. December 14

* Please quote SD1

Workshops fill fast. To book phone 8372 0150