

Weed

Feather grass *Pennisetum villosum*

For many years a number of *Pennisetum* grasses have been used as garden grasses in Australia, the most common being kikuyu grass (*Pennisetum clandestinum*).

Some grasses can readily escape the garden area and become weeds on bushland and farmland.

Feather grass is one of those which has escaped from gardens.

An environmental and farm weed

Feather grass is not only an environmental weed it is also a weed of pasture.

I have seen this weed become more prevalent over the last few years.

In the past it was mainly found along railway lines in the mid-north of South Australia but now it is found on many roadsides throughout the state.

Near Palmer it is beginning to seriously invade pasture paddocks.

This grass is unpalatable to stock and has been declared a noxious weed in some parts of Australia.

It can even be found on footpaths near the Trees For Life office at Pasadena.

How to identify it

Feather grass forms a short dense tussock up to 90cm tall, but is usually 50–70cm tall.

The leaves are quite narrow, 2–6mm wide and up to 30cm long, and are distinctly channelled.

The plant produces a white/cream feathery flowerhead, which can be up to 12cm long and the individual seeds are very fluffy and easily moved around by wind.

You can see this as populations spread along roads and railway lines.

The seed readily attaches to the coats of sheep, cattle and other animals.

If you find this plant ANYWHERE (and you are confident of its identity) please try to kill it.

How to remove it

If you find it on your Bush For Life site the best method of control is to slash the tussocks a few centimetres above the ground, wait for a flush of new growth and then spray it with Glyphosate™ at a rate of 1:100.

Spraying mature plants is less effective because Glyphosate™ is not readily absorbed through older leaves.

Fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*) is a close relative of feather grass and looks like a taller version with purple flowerheads.

This grass is also a serious environmental weed and should be treated the same way.

In the past, these grasses have been encouraged because they do not require much water to survive, making them ideal for South Australian conditions.

Unfortunately, this means they can readily escape from gardens and you may now find them established on your Bush For Life site.

Peter Tucker



Feather grass

Photo courtesy of Plants of Western NSW Inkata Press, 1992.

Native

Brush wiregrass *Aristida behriana*



Brush wire grass

Photo courtesy of Plants of Western NSW Inkata Press, 1992.

All *Aristida* grasses are commonly referred to as three awn grasses. This alludes to an easy way to identify them, but more on that later.

Three awn grasses can be found in many areas of South Australia, but they tend to be more prominent in the drier areas of the state.

You are more likely to have *Aristida behriana* on your Bush For Life site if it is part of a grassland or grassy woodland.

How to recognise it

Brush wiregrass is a perennial grass that forms low open tussocks.

As the common name suggests, this grass is quite tough and 'wiry', particularly the older plants.

The leaves are narrow, about 2mm wide, and up to 25cm long. And yes, they are wiry.

By contrast the flowerheads are quite open and appear to be soft, almost fluffy, but in fact, they too are wiry (in a soft sort of way!).

You will notice the young flowerheads will have a purplish tinge, but as they mature the flowerheads turn a creamy straw colour.

The whole plant can sometimes be up to 40cm tall.

To confidently identify a three awn grass all you need do is to pick some mature seeds and examine them.

If they have three awns spreading evenly from a single column attached to the seed then you have one!

If the plant is fairly low, less than 40cm, it will probably be *Aristida behriana*.

To be absolutely certain it is best to check with your Regional Coordinator because you may have discovered the ephemeral *Aristida contorta* (mulga grass) another native three awn grass.

Threats

The main threats to brush wiregrass are weed invasion and grazing by stock and rabbits.

Grazing is more of a threat to young plants, which means regeneration can be badly affected.

The threatening weed species are typical of grassy ecosystems and include weeds such as soursofs, rice millet and more recently, feather grass.

How to look after this grass

Brush wiregrass responds well to spot regeneration.

Any weeds occurring near this grass can be carefully sprayed with Glyphosate™.

Perennial weed grasses can be cut to within 5–10cm of the ground and the new growth can then be sprayed.

You may find it easier to place a small container over the brush wiregrass to protect it from any potential off-target spray damage.

It is important to take the time to check the immediate area for any other native plants before you begin spraying the weeds.

After treating the nearby weeds you should see the brush wiregrass improve dramatically.

With any luck, the following year you will see lots of young brush wiregrass taking the place of those disgraceful and nasty weeds.

Peter Tucker

