



Bush For Life

Tambookie or Coolatai grass? Either way it's a weed

Perennial weed grasses seem to be increasing in South Australian bushland.

This may be due partly to the increased use of grasses from Mediterranean climates in our gardens.

Typically, we are encouraged to use these grasses because they are water efficient and produce an attractive feature for our gardens.

These grasses are rarely sterile and because they come from similar climates to our own, readily invade our bushland.

A grass that has become a serious weed over the past few years is tambookie grass (sometimes called coolatai grass) *Hyparrhenia hirta*.

It is native to Africa and the Mediterranean region.

This grass has invaded many hectares of council reserves, roadsides and parks.

Salisbury Council alone has approximately 500 hectares of land where this weed is considered a serious problem.

Tambookie grass is a perennial that forms a tussock similar to some of our native grasses.

It also looks like some of our native grasses.

This is not surprising considering it is closely related to some of them, indeed they used to be classified in the same genus; *Andropogon*.

Two genera of native grass that used to be classified as *Andropogon* are *Cymbopogon* and *Bothriochloa*.

What it looks like

Once established, tambookie grass develops into a very thick and large tussock.

The photograph on the right shows tambookie grass in a Gawler garden; note the size of the tussocks.

In bushland tussocks can be up to 2m high, but are usually 1–1.5m and not as dense as those found in gardens.

Once established in bushland it rapidly replaces nearly all native vegetation.

Unlike native grasses it eliminates inter-tussock spaces and crowds out native lilies, orchids and small herbaceous plants.

In early stages it can be very difficult to tell tambookie grass from *Cymbopogon ambiguus* (lemon



Tambookie grass growing in a Gawler garden. Note the tussocks are so large they are almost shrubs!

scented grass) or *Bothriochloa macra* (red-leg grass).

Tambookie grass has thin grey/green leaves 10–30cm long and 1–5mm wide.

The seed heads have numerous small hairs over them, similar to the two natives.

So how can I tell it from the natives?

The easiest way to distinguish it from *Cymbopogon ambiguus* is to crush some of the leaves between your fingers.

If it has a lemon scent the grass will be the native *Cymbopogon ambiguus*.

Interestingly, the culinary lemon grass belongs to the same genus as the native *Cymbopogon ambiguus*.

However, I would not recommend using the native in the same manner.

“[When] I tried a decoction of the leaves of this plant one evening I suffered from an almost continuous stream of vivid nightmares throughout the night!”

Peter Latz, 1996, Bushfires and bush Tucker: Aboriginal plant use in Central Australia.

Bothriochloa macra is usually a smaller plant only growing to 80cm in height. The stems often have a red-purplish tinge.

If you think you may have seen tambookie grass it is critical to get it properly identified.

You should contact your regional coordinator or take a specimen to the Plant Biodiversity Centre (State Herbarium) to get its identity confirmed.

How to control it

Terry Leach from Salisbury Council has spent considerable time and effort developing a method of control for tambookie grass.

Bush For Life volunteers can use the results of his research to control tambookie grass on their site:

Starting from the edge of the weed front the tambookie grass can be cut to within 5–10 cm of the ground.

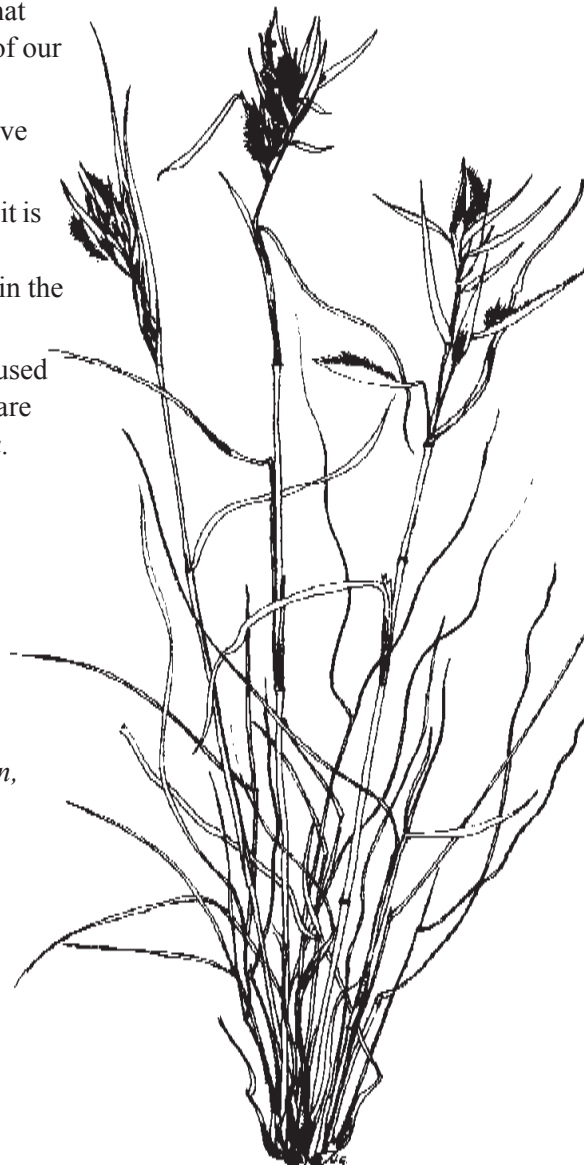
Two to three weeks later the plant should be actively growing.

At this stage it can be sprayed with Glyphosate™.

It is then critical that the plant is sprayed again three weeks later irrespective of how it looks.

Terry has found that it will almost always resprout if not sprayed a second time.

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Cymbopogon ambiguus (lemon scented grass). Drawing by Jenny Green, from P Latz, 1996, Bushfires & Bushtucker, Aboriginal plant use in Central Australia, IAD Press.



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