Native Grasses for Revegetation in the Townsville Region

Nanette Hooker
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**Introduction**

The grass family (Poaceae) are one of the largest and most cosmopolitan of the flowering plant families of the world comprising of more than 10,000 species. Grasses are found almost everywhere (even Antarctica). They are adapted to a wide range of climatic and soil conditions, and grow in habitats ranging from deserts to freshwater and marine environments. Grasses form a major component of many vegetation communities, e.g. grasslands, steppe, prairie and savannas.

Grasses are the most important plant family for humans. They provide a source of food (wheat, oats, maize, rice, sugarcane) and most of the grazing for wild and domesticated animals. Grass-use pervades all aspects of human endeavour; building materials, artistic pursuits, sports and leisure activities. New uses of grasses are still being found e.g. for environmental management. Humans have used grasses in a multiplicity of ways over a great period of time.

Native grasses are an important and integral component of many vegetation communities; therefore they have an important role to play in rehabilitation and revegetation programmes. A grass has a fibrous root system and they can hold soil together and reduce erosion. Certain grass species can be used to prevent soil erosion on unstable surfaces such as beach sands (*Thuarea involuta*) and riparian areas (*Arundinella nepalensis*).

Australian grasses provide food and shelter for many Australian birds and animals. The seeds of many native grasses are important components in the diet of several granivorous parrots and finches (*Alloteropsis semialata*, *Chrysopogon fallax*, *Eragrostis* species, *Heteropogon triticeus*, *Sarga plumosum*, *Setaria surgens*), and the bulbous bases of some grasses is a food source for a number of native animals (*Alloteropsis semialata*, *Chrysopogon fallax*). The leaves of many species of grasses are used for nest and burrow linings for many Australian birds, animals and reptiles; also some grass species (*Sarga plumosum*, *Themeda triandra*) are the main component in the diet of many Australian herbivores.

In Australia there are over 1300 species, this includes non-natives grasses. In the Townsville area there are more than 220 grass species, 160 of these are native. Twelve species have been selected for inclusion in this booklet. These species were chosen based on a number of factors:

- annuals to long-lived perennials
- variable heights
- variable environmental requirements
- availability of seeds
- germination knowledge
- availability of seedlings

There is a table at the back of the booklet that summarises some of these features.

Planning is one of the most important aspects of any revegetation effort, and the decision whether or not to use Australian native grasses is an integral part of this process. Most grasses grow best in full sun or partial shade, and revegetation sites need to be prepared to give the new grasses the best possible chance of survival.

Although Australian native grass species are considered as being low input and low maintenance, this should not be confused with “zero” management. In many revegetation sites there may be a number of introduced or weed grasses, which, superficially look similar to many native species, particularly seedlings. This is especially relevant in riparian areas where the presence of higher nutrient and moisture levels mean there is probably dense stands of non-native grasses. For this reason, getting to know the grass species on the site is very important.

Most Australian native grasses do not have the ability to compete with robust, non-native grasses, e.g. Guinea Grass (*Megathyrsus maximus*), therefore it is best for the site to be free of these weedy species, or the site must be regularly maintained.

Selection of appropriate native grasses for a particular site will depend on the proposed use of the area. Some grass species can grow in a wide range of habitats, and on a wide range of soil types.
Below is a list of suggestions of grass species for some habitats.

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<td>Themeda triandra</td>
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The Grass Plant
The use of technical terms in botanical descriptions is necessary in the family of grasses. The diagram below illustrates some of these terms which may be used in this booklet.

**Terminology:**

- **Inflorescence** - a group or cluster of flowers arranged on a stem.
- **Spikelet** - flower or seed.
- **Culm** - stem.
- **Leaf blade** - the expanded upper portion of a leaf.
- **Ligule** - a membranous or hairy appendage at the junction between sheath and blade.
- **Leaf sheath** - the basal part of a grass leaf between the node and the ligule; at maturity it often comes away from the stem.
- **Node** - the part of the stem from which the leaf arises, usually thickened.
- **Tiller** - new shoot.
- **Stolon** - a trailing stem that produces roots at the nodes.
- **Rhizome** - an underground stem, usually growing horizontally, producing roots at the nodes.

Drawing from (Tothill and Hacker 1983)
The grass inflorescence

The basic grass inflorescence is composed of clusters of spikelets (flowers) arranged in a panicle which may be modified in a number of ways. The types of branching and the arrangement of spikelets on the branches determine the different types of grass inflorescence.

Types of grass inflorescences:

- **Raceme and Spike**
  - The inflorescence is unbranched; the raceme has spikelets with pedicels, the spike has spikelets without pedicels (spikelets are sessile)

- **Open panicle**
  - Inflorescence with branches obvious

- **Spicate panicle**
  - Inflorescence with branches not obvious

- **Spatheate inflorescence**
  - The branches of the inflorescence are subtended by spathes (leaf-like bracts)

- **Digitate inflorescence**
  - Inflorescence branches arranged at the top of peduncle like the fingers of the hand

**Places to obtain local native grasses**

- **Greening Australia Dry Tropics Nursery**, 1 Desailly St, Gulliver
  - @ Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE, Horticulture Unit, Pimlico Campus
  - Ph: (07) 4796 0411  Fax: (07) 4725 7922
  - Email: drytropics@qld.greeningaustralia.org.au

- **Bush Garden Nursery, CVA - CDTLI**
  - End of Thompson Street, Mundingburra
  - Inside the Townsville Community Learning Centre grounds
  - Phone CVA: (07) 4721 4077
  - Phone CDTLI: (07) 4721 4322
Alloteropsis semialata
Cockatoo Grass

NAME
Alloteropsis is from the Greek allotrios (belonging to another) and opsis (appearance), the spikelets and inflorescences somewhat resemble another genus of grass; and semialata, from the Latin semi (half) and ala (wing) and -ata (possessing), referring to the winged margins of the upper glume.

DESCRIPTION
Alloteropsis semialata is a tufted, perennial grass 20-100 cm tall. The base of the plant forms a bulb which is covered with dense, woolly hairs. The inflorescence consists of two to five finger-like branches, 2-22 cm long.

Cockatoo Grass is one of the first grasses to grow and ripen after the onset of the wet season, with flowering and seeding generally occurring about six weeks after the first rains.

DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT
This grass is native to Australia, Asia and Africa. It is common throughout the tropics and subtropics of Australia and grows on sandy and loamy soils, including eucalypt woodland.

ECOLOGICAL NOTES
The seeds of cockatoo grass are an important component in the wet-season diet of several granivorous parrots and finches, including masked finch, black-throated finch, long-tailed finch, hooded parrot, the endangered golden-shouldered parrot, and the endangered gouldian finch. The bulbous bases of this grass are a food source for a number of animals, e.g. cockatoo grass is an important component of the northern bettong’s diet in the dry season.

PROPAGATION
Research has shown that the seeds of this species lose their viability after 1 year unless stored in a freezer. Therefore, seeds should be sown soon after collection or within 12 months of collection.
**NAME**

*Arundinella nepalensis* is from the Latin *arundo* (a reed) and *ella* (diminutive suffix), refers to the thin, reed-like habit; *nepalensis*, indicates that the species was originally collected in Nepal.

**DESCRIPTION**

*Arundinella nepalensis* is a perennial, grass with rigid, erect stems to 2 metres tall, arising from a thick horizontal rhizome. The inflorescence is a narrow pyramid-shaped panicle, 5-40 cm long.

**DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT**

This species has a wide distribution and is native to Australia, Africa and Asia. Reed grass prefers damps sites, growing mostly along creek banks, it is also found in hollows or shallow swamps.

**ECOLOGICAL NOTES**

It is a valuable native grass for reducing stream bank erosion, therefore is a good species for riparian revegetation sites. It can survive growing in water for a number of weeks.

**PROPAGATION**

Seeds need to be stored for 6 months to overcome dormancy.
**Chrysopogon fallax**
Golden Beard Grass

**NAME**
*Chrysopogon* is from the Greek *chrysos* (golden) and *pogon* (beard), alluding to the golden hairs on the inflorescence; *fallax* from the Latin for deceptive, closely resembling another species.

**DESCRIPTION**
*Chrysopogon fallax* is an erect, tufted, perennial grass 30-150 cm tall. Leaves are mostly basal; the old leaf sheaths persist and have a woolly appearance. The inflorescence is a panicle 7-21 cm long, with whorled branches. The spikelets appear at the end of the branches and are purplish to golden-brown.

**DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT**
This species is endemic to Australia and grows on a range of soils, it occurs on sand among dunes, but also found on clay and in rocky places. This grass is resistant to drought and heavy grazing.

**ECOLOGICAL NOTES**
Golden beard grass is eaten by the hairy-nosed wombat and the seeds are eaten by the long-tailed finch.

**PROPAGATION**
There is some indication that the seed may need to be stored for two years to achieve maximum germination.
**Cymbopogon bombycinus**  
Silky Oilgrass, Silky Heads, Citronella Grass

**NAME**  
*Cymbopogon* is from the Greek *kumbe* (boat) and *pogon* (beard), alluding to the boat-shaped sheaths which enclose the small racemes, which are bearded; *bombycinus* - from the Latin *bombyx* (silk) and *inus* (belonging to), referring to the inflorescence or leaves invested with long silky hairs.

**DESCRIPTION**  
*Cymbopogon bombycinus* is a tufted, short-lived perennial, 30-120 cm tall. The leaves turn a distinct golden colour and curl on maturity. The spikelets are covered with dense woolly hairs giving them a fluffy appearance; each inflorescence branch is subtended by a spathe (leafy bract) which becomes reddish at maturity.

The leaves of all species *Cymbopogon* have an aromatic smell when crushed. The cultivated lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) is used as a culinary herb, in the manufacture of perfume and as an ingredient for curry.

**DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT**  
This grass is endemic to Australia. It occurs in eucalypt forests and savannas of tropical and subtropical Australia on sandy or stony soils. Usually grows on hillsides in well-drained soils.

**ECOLOGICAL NOTES**  
*Cymbopogon bombycinus* produces many seeds which germinate quickly, therefore it will self propagate on revegetation sites.

**PROPAGATION**  
Seeds only needed to be stored for 1-2 months to overcome dormancy.
**Enneapogon robustissimus**
Nineawn Grass

**NAME**
*Enneapogon* is from the Greek *ennea* (nine) and *pogon* (beard), alluding to the nine plumose lemma awns; and *robustissimus* from the Latin for most robust, the grass is very tall for the genus.

**DESCRIPTION**
There are only 16 species of *Enneapogon* in Australia, all are natives. The genus is readily recognised by the nine-awned lemmas, with each spikelet having 2 or more florets the spreading awns form an attractive circular arrangement.

*Enneapogon robustissimus* is a tufted, annual or short-lived perennial grass 30 to 100 cm tall. The inflorescence, 1.5-11 cm long, is a spicate panicle (the panicle branches are very short which makes the inflorescence appear like a spike).

**DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT**
This grass is endemic to Australia. It often grows on sandy soils near creeks and in gullies on rocky hills.

**ECOLOGICAL NOTES**
Many species of *Enneapogon* grow in central Australia, and they provide food for budgerigars and parrot.

**PROPAGATION**
Seeds only need to be stored for 1 month to overcome dormancy.
**Eragrostis elongata**
Clustered Lovegrass

**NAME**
*Eragrostis* is possibly from the Greek *eros* (love) and *Agrostis* a Greek name for a herb; *elongata* from the Latin for elongated refers to the elongated inflorescence.

**DESCRIPTION**
*Eragrostis* is a cosmopolitan genus of about 350 species worldwide; there are about 73 species in Australia (58 native species), and 15 introduced species. In Queensland there are 62 species. Species of *Eragrostis* are commonly early invaders of arable land and often found on poor or sandy soils or disturbed ground.

*Eragrostis elongata* is a tufted, annual or short-lived perennial 20 - 90 cm tall, leafy and compact near base. Inflorescence 3 - 30 cm long, with spikelets in compact interrupted clusters. Flowers and fruits in response to rain.

**DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT**
This grass is native to Australia, also occurs in Papua New Guinea and the Moluccas. It was also introduced in Hawaii and Florida in the U.S.A. and the West Indies.

Grows on a wide range of soil types, often in or near alluvial, well-watered habitats, also on beach dunes, in rocky gullies, and on disturbed sites.

**ECOLOGICAL NOTES**
*Eragrostis elongata* produces many seeds which germinate quickly; therefore will self propagate on revegetation sites. The seeds provide food for finches.

**PROPAGATION**
This species produces lots of seeds, which germinate easily; storage of one month is required to overcome dormancy.
**Heteropogon triticeus**  
Giant Spear Grass

**NAME**
*Heteropogon* from the Greek *heteros* (different) and *pogon* (beard), alluding to the difference between the awnless male and awned female spikelets; *triticeus*, resembling *Triticum* (wheat) with respect to the inflorescence.

**DESCRIPTION**
*Heteropogon triticeus* is a tufted, perennial grass. In the dry season, when not flowering, it is about 50-70 cm tall. In the wet season, the flowering stems grow quickly by a section of the pale yellow stem being pushed upwards until it protrudes well above the green leaf sheath that previously enclosed it. The pale sections of the internodes alternate with the green sheaths giving the plant a conspicuously banded appearance. These flowering stems are about 2 m tall and are clearly visible above other grass. The inflorescence is a raceme more than 9 cm long, the upper spikelets have long awns (elongated bristle-like appendages) that extend above the raceme, and when the seeds mature, the awns tangle with each other.

**DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT**
Giant spear grass is native to Asia and Australia. It grows in eucalypt forests and woodlands, on brown and red clay loams and occasionally sandy loams and gravelly soils in the wetter areas.

**ECOLOGICAL NOTES**
This species is an ideal revegetation species where the reintroduction of native animals is important, it is an important food source for many granivores, the seeds of giant spear grass are eaten by gouldian finch, masked finch and long-tailed finch.

**PROPAGATION**
Seeds need to be stored for 8 months to overcome dormancy.
Ischaemum australe
Large Bluegrass

NAME
Ischaemum is from the Greek ischo (to restrain) and haima (blood), as woolly seeds of the type species were reported as being used to stop bleeding; australe, from the south (Australia).

DESCRIPTION
Ischaemum australe is an erect, tufted, rhizomatous perennial 50-120 cm tall. The inflorescence, 3-10 cm long, may appear to be a simple spike, but is composed of 2 erect, closely appressed branches; as the seeds mature the branches come apart and become fragile and readily break at the joints.

DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT
Large bluegrass is native to Australia and tropical Asia. It grows in coastal areas in wet situations, swamps and poor sandy soils

ECOLOGICAL NOTES
This grass appears to be a good species for revegetation of wetland areas, and has robust rhizomes (underground stems) which give the plant the potential to compete with weedy non-native species. It can survive growing in water for long periods during the wet season.

PROPAGATION
Seeds need to be stored for 10 months to overcome dormancy.
**Sarga plumosum**
Plume Sorghum

**NAME**
Sarga, the meaning is obscure; *plumosum* from the Latin for feathery, referring to the long hairs giving the pedicels a feathery appearance.

**DESCRIPTION**
*Sarga plumosum* is a tufted, perennial grass 1-3 m tall. The stems have distinctive bearded nodes. Leaves usually have a white mid-rib, and vary in colour from shiny green to blue-green. The inflorescence is usually a dense panicle 12-45 cm long, with dark red-brown spikelets.

**DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT**
Plume sorghum is native to Australia and tropical Asia. It is found on sands, red earths and heavy loams, and grows in swamps, claypans, watercourses, waterholes and valleys.

**ECOLOGICAL NOTES**
The seeds of giant spear grass are eaten by gouldian finch, masked finch and long-tailed finch.

**PROPAGATION**
Seeds need to be stored for 9 months to overcome dormancy.
**Setaria surgens**
Pigeon Grass

**NAME**
Setaria is from the Latin *seta* (bristle), referring to the bristly inflorescences; *surgens* from the Latin *surgo* (raise), referring to the long ascending culms.

**DESCRIPTION**
*Setaria surgens* is a decumbent or ascending annual, 20-60 cm tall. The inflorescence is bottle-brush shaped and the seeds are held close to the stem among stiff whitish to purplish 1 cm long bristles. These bristles remain after the plump, ripe seeds fall.

**DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT**
Pigeon grass is endemic to Australia and grows mostly on sandy soils of forest country.

**ECOLOGICAL NOTES**
The seeds of many *Setaria* species are a valuable food source for numerous bird species. Varieties of *Setaria italica* seeds are commonly found in bird seeds sold in the shops. *Setaria surgens* grass seeds are a food source for many Australian birds; it is a source of food for the rare, black-throated finch.

Queensland Department of Main Roads is currently using this species for roadside revegetation.

**PROPAGATION**
Seeds only needed to be stored for 1-2 months to overcome dormancy. Pigeon grass is sometimes rather delicate and should be planted in clumps. When the plant dies it should have produced plenty of seeds which should germinate quickly in the new season.
**Themeda triandra**
**Kangaroo Grass**

**NAME**
*Themeda* is from the Arabic *thaemed* (little water), the allusion is obscure; and *triandra* is from the Greek *treis* (three) and *aner* (man), possessing three stamens (most grasses have three stamens).

**DESCRIPTION**
*Themeda triandra* is a tufted perennial grass; the local species in Townsville is 30-100 cm tall. The inflorescence is leafy and up to 35 cm long; each inflorescence branch is subtended by a spathe (leafy bract). Kangaroo grass is probably the most recognisable member of the grass family in Australia.

**DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT**
*Themeda triandra* is native to Australia, Africa and Asia. It was more widespread prior to European settlement; it is very susceptible to overgrazing and has been replaced by black speargrass (*Heteropogon contortus*) owing to a combination of fire and grazing.

**ECOLOGICAL NOTES**
*Themeda triandra* is widely used for landscaping and revegetation.

**PROPAGATION**
Seeds usually need to be stored for 12 months to overcome dormancy.
**Thuarea involuta**
Tropical Beachgrass, Bird’s Beak Grass

**NAME**
*Thuarea* is named after French botanist and ship’s officer Aubert du Petit-Thouars (1756-1831); *involuta* from the Latin *involvo* (inroll), referring to the inrolled leaf blades.

**DESCRIPTION**
*Thuarea involuta* is a mat-forming, perennial grass with velvety-soft leaves. This prostrate grass is 2.5 to 25 cm tall. The inflorescence is a one-sided raceme, is 1-3 cm long, with 1 to 2 female flowers at the base and 4 to 6 male flowers at the apex.

The short flowering shoots bend down as the seed ripens, and the capsules (formed by the spathe in a water-tight fold) either become buried in the sand or float away in the sea.

**DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT**
This grass is native to Australia, Asia and Africa; and is restricted to sandy coastal areas; it is usually found on sandy foredunes.

**ECOLOGICAL NOTES**
It is an efficient sand binder and forms deep roots and can grow in shaded areas. It has been planted at Saunders Beach for dune stabilisation.

**PROPAGATION**
This grass has been propagated vegetatively, by planting sprigs.
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<th>Preferred Habitats - Key</th>
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<td>January - February</td>
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<td><em>Arundinella nepalensis</em></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td><em>Cymbopogon bombycinus</em></td>
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<td><em>Enneapogon robustissimus</em></td>
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</tr>
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<td>20-90</td>
<td>Range of soils</td>
<td>ROWB</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Heteropogon triticeus</em></td>
<td>Perennial</td>
<td>Tufted, erect</td>
<td>20-200</td>
<td>Loams and gravelly soils</td>
<td>O</td>
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<td><em>Ischaemum australis</em></td>
<td>Perennial</td>
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<td>50-120</td>
<td>Damp soils, sands</td>
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<td><em>Sarga plumosum</em></td>
<td>Perennial</td>
<td>Tufted, erect</td>
<td>100-300</td>
<td>Range of soils</td>
<td>ROW</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Setaria surgens</em></td>
<td>Annual</td>
<td>Tufted or trailing on ground</td>
<td>20-60</td>
<td>Mostly sands</td>
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<td>Range of soils</td>
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