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A and B—BUFFEL GRASS (*Cenchrus ciliaris* L); A—Plant showing habit; B—Burr; C and D—BIRDWOOD GRASS (*Cenchrus setigerns* Vahl.); C—Plant showing habit; D—Burrs.
BUFFEL AND BIRDWOOD GRASSES
TWO USEFUL PERENNIALS

By H. SUIJDENDORP, B.Sc. Agric., Agricultural Adviser

BUFFEL grass (Cenchrus ciliaris L.) and Birdwood grass (Cenchrus setigerns. Vahl.) are two introduced perennial grasses which have become established in the coastal pastoral areas in the North-West of Western Australia. Both provide excellent grazing, being more nutritious than the majority of the native grasses, and efforts are being made to establish them over wider areas.

Buffel grass is native to north and tropical Africa and extends from Arabia to India. It is also found on Madagascar and Socotra.

Seeds appear to have been accidentally introduced into the North-West of this State around 1910, probably in camel fodder, and the plant spread readily in the coastal areas.

In its native lands, Buffel grass appears to favour sandy country but it seems to be adaptable to a fairly wide range of soil conditions and does particularly well in light soils near limestone outcrops.

The grass is a fairly palatable tussocky perennial very well suited to our arid pastoral country in the summer rainfall belt. It has been able to survive as far south as Sandstone, but would not be suitable for the winter rainfall conditions in the South-west of this State.

If left ungrazed Buffel grass attains a height of about two feet but at this stage it grows somewhat rank and is less palatable. It stands up well to rather heavy grazing and is best utilised by keeping it eaten down.

Germination trials have indicated that fresh seed remains dormant and only 2 per cent. germinates readily. Of a sowing of two-year-old seed 71 per cent. germinated in the first eight days.

As seed is scarce and somewhat costly, the advisability of storing supplies from one to two years in a dry place, can be readily appreciated.

Using this matured seed, a sowing rate of 3 lb. to the acre should be sufficient as this would be equal to three viable seeds to the square link.

The growth habit varies with soil and climatic conditions. Under adverse conditions it has been known to set viable seeds only six weeks after germination, the plant being then only three inches tall with a single stalk. Under favourable conditions it forms a dense tussock up two feet in diameter and 30 inches tall with numerous flowering heads.

Buffel grass is much more nutritious than most of the native North-West grasses and, being a perennial will provide grazing over fairly long periods.

Birdwood grass is named after the late Field-Marshall W. R. Birdwood, G.C.B., G.S.S.I., C.M.G., C.I.E., D.S.O., who sent a parcel of the seed from India to this State.

It is closely related to Buffel grass and is very similar in general characteristics. Its forage yield is somewhat higher than that of Buffel grass, and under favourable conditions it may attain a height of four feet. The growing season is somewhat longer than that of Buffel grass and it seems adaptable to a wider range of soil conditions.

Experiments are being conducted to determine the most economical methods of establishing these species. Some sort of cultivation seems to be necessary in order to obtain satisfactory results. Alternatively, some measure of success has been obtained by scattering seed where stock can trample it into the soil. It is relatively easy to establish the grasses in yards by this method. The best time for seeding would be shortly before the summer rains are expected, for example in November-December.

References.
"Flora of W.A. Vol. 1" by C. A. Gardner.
"Pasture Plants of the Kimberleys" by L. C. Snook & K. M. Durack.
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