Weeds of Western Australia—Mexican poppy

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Mexican Poppy, as the name implies, is native to Mexico, but also extends to Texas and Central America. In this State it occurs mainly in the Geraldton district although a few plants have been found in widely scattered areas. Besides having toxic properties it can be a troublesome competitor in crops and pastures.
As the name implies, Mexican Poppy is native to Mexico, its range also extending northwards to Texas and southwards to Central America. Although usually referred to as Mexican Poppy, it is also known as prickly or yellow poppy and blue thistle or white thistle. The blue and white are descriptive of the leaf colouration which is shown clearly in the coloured illustration.

It has been a resident of New South Wales for a long period, the French botanist Verraux having collected specimens in George Street, Sydney, in 1845. One fears that a plant-collecting trip along that thoroughfare at the present time would be both unprofitable and dangerous.

The plant is now widespread in New South Wales and Queensland, especially on soils which retain moisture during the summer months. It has also proved of some consequence in the other Australian States.

Just as the method of introduction to the Eastern States is not known with certainty, its early history in Western Australia is not well defined. It may have become established firstly in the Geraldton district where it now occurs freely on some of the moist flats. Other districts from which it has been recorded include Meekatharra, Menzies, York, Toodyay, Beverley, Tambellup, and Bunbury. Mexican Poppy is known to have been distributed as an impurity in hay and chaff, and this explains in part, at least, its introduction and spread to the areas mentioned.

DESCRIPTION

As already stated, a portion of the name refers to the country of origin. Argemone being a member of the poppy family, Papaveraceae, the remainder of the name is justly applicable. The plants more frequently known as poppies belong to the genus Papaver and include several garden species along with the plant from which opium is derived. Although, prior to flowering, it has the appearance of a thistle, Mexican Poppy is not closely related to that group.

It is an annual herb, up to 3 ft. high with sessile, alternate, greyish variegated leaves having acute teeth ending in spines. The flowers are large, solitary, with four pale yellow petals and numerous stamens. The fruit or capsule is oblong, spiny and opening by three to six valves at the summit. It contains a large number of dark-coloured seeds, each having longitudinal rows of tubercles.

SIGNIFICANCE

Although it can prove a troublesome competitor in crops, most significance is centred around the toxic properties of Mexican Poppy. Experiences are somewhat variable, but there is no doubt that it can prove harmful under some circumstances. Narcotic properties are possessed by a number of members of the family and the presence of a toxic principle in Mexican Poppy is not surprising. Maiden states that some farmers in South Africa consider it to be a useful fodder plant. In New South Wales, although regarded as being unpalatable and seldom eaten by stock, losses have been attributed to it on a number of
MEXICAN POPPY
(Argemone Mexicana L.)

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occasions. In Queensland, White states that the plant is suspected but rarely eaten by stock. He also refers to its reputed toxic properties, but states that it has only proved dangerous “where it has been cut and allowed to wilt and the subsequently softened plants fed to poddy calves. He also makes reference to the intensely bitter sap which renders it unpalatable to animals.

In New South Wales, illness in fowls and a temporary drop in egg production were attributed to the large quantities of Mexican Poppy seeds present among wheat grain on which the birds had been feeding. Subsequently, feeding trials appeared to confirm the assumption. Several birds kept under observation died after varying periods of ingestion.

The toxic principle is not clearly understood, but apparently has decided irritant properties.

Mexican Poppy is a primary noxious weed for the State.

CONTROL

Being an annual, prevention from seeding must be given first priority when considering control measures. Isolated plants should be pulled or grubbed when they first appear, and those which have seeded before being noticed, should be removed carefully and destroyed, taking care not to scatter the seeds.

With more extensive areas, cultivation is the most practical method, and a year of clean fallow will do much to reduce the extent of this weed. When it occurs in a crop it is advisable to cut for hay before seeds have formed. If it persists in pastures, Mexican Poppy can be controlled by mowing at the early flowering stage in order to prevent seed formation. This procedure is not always entirely satisfactory, however, as the plants sometimes produce lateral flowering shoots following cutting, especially when they are growing on moist land or are favoured by late rains.

Although not highly susceptible to the hormone-like herbicides, when the plants are small they can be controlled by spray-
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