100 years: the Journal of Agriculture

Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia

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Erratum
CORRECTION: It was wrongly stated that Eric Lawson began the Fourth Series of the Journal of Agriculture in 1960. This series had already begun when Eric became editor in 1961.
The Journal of the Bureau of Agriculture made its debut on 3 April 1894 and over the intervening century has been published in a variety of styles, reflecting the fashions of the day and personal preferences of individual editors.

The first Secretary, Mr Lancelot Lindley-Cowen, who introduced a fortnightly black and white publication of eight pages in April 1894, would not recognise the full colour quarterly magazine that is the Department of Agriculture's flagship publication of 1994. He would also be confused by the printing jargon, as computers, on which production is now based, were not even a dream.

Subjects discussed in those early Journals however, often remain relevant today – the threat of 'codling moth' to our horticultural industries, comparisons between different fertilisers, suggestions on companion planting to reduce insect pests and "all that relates to tillage of the soil".

**The first issues**

In its first year the Journal was offered free to anyone who was a member of an Agricultural Society, Vine and Fruitgrowers Association, Farmers' Club or any other society "having for its object the advancement of rural industries". Those not eligible for free copies could take out an annual subscription, payable in advance costing two shillings, or buy single copies at one penny each.

Secretaries of societies were exhorted to send in the dates of their shows, ploughing matches, horse parades and other fixtures to the Secretary of the Bureau for publication.

"The Bureau itself is an institution of very recent creation," the readers of the first issue were informed, "and has hardly had time as yet to get into working order. It was felt however, that no time should be lost in providing a medium of communication between the agriculturalists of the colony and the Bureau.

"The success of both in a great measure, depends on the intimacy of their relations; and it is hoped that the agriculturalists of Western Australia will take as lively an interest in the doings of the Bureau as it is anxious to do in their concerns.

"Every effort will be made to faithfully guard and foster the interests of that large, important and happily ever-increasing class, which is the mainstay of this, and every other community of civilised beings."

The first issue included a letter to the editor from Josceline G.H. Amherst, Hon. Sec. Swan Dist. Vine and Fruitgrowers Association. This related to debate in the *Argus* newspaper in Melbourne about the benefits of planting tomatoes around the bases of fruit trees to keep them freer of blight and insects, and a wish to stimulate discussion on this subject in WA.

Subsequent fortnightly issues carried hints about spraying various forms of arsenic to control insect pests and how to set a hen. Considerable space concerned manures and manuring – "a subject
that even the most dense and retrograde farmer must admit has an important bearing on profitable production."

Night soil was then on sale for £3 per ton at Fremantle in lots of no less than five tons. At this time, night soil was seen as having two disadvantages – it was rather lumpy and bulky.

Warnings were also given about possible adulteration of fertilisers if bought from unreliable sources – a subject that remains relevant, even if it is no longer covered in Journal articles.

'Silvereyes' were a chronic problem for orchardists and two shillings and sixpence was paid for destruction of 100 birds in 1895.

A big issue among colonists was the introduction of diseases with fruit trees and other plant material imported from interstate and overseas.

Local spellings sometimes differed slightly from those we use today. Pinjarrah rather than Pinjarra, Broome Hill as two words and Dongarra instead of Dongara were noticed in early days.

Costs of publications

By 1898, the Bureau of Agriculture had been renamed the Department of Agriculture and the Journal reflected this change in 1899, becoming monthly ("as nearly as possible to the 15th of each month") with an annual subscription of two shillings and sixpence or single copies at threepence each.

Monthly reports from the Secretary, Mr Lindley-Cowen, to the Minister for Crown Lands were prominent, and he evinced surprise in 1899 that some vegetable gardens in the Bridgetown area, more than an acre in area, were being worked entirely by hand and not using horse labour.

Artificial manures that had been purchased at high prices but found to be absolutely useless were also a worry, despite the Feed Stuffs and Fertilisers Act of 1895.

"I pointed out to the victims that they only had themselves to blame," he wrote. "It is evident that the average farmer prefers to run the risk of losing a season and a crop to paying the analyst a few shillings in order to have the manure analysed before he buys it. Again, the vendors of manures generally ignore the Act and yet I have to hear of any prosecution by a farmer who has been defrauded."

Queensland fruit fly was another concern, as was horse bot. But the good news was the triumph of local Western Australian flours over imports at the recent Coolgardie Exhibition.

Handy hints and general notes were a common inclusion:

- "Fresh duck dung on an average contains 1 per cent nitrogen, and 1.5 per cent phosphoric acid."
- "Beware of the Florida velvet bean. It is the host of the pumpkin (stink) bug. It is not as good as the cow-pea for either seed or forage."

Local photographs

Technology in publishing was progressing rapidly, and by 1906 (when subscriptions had doubled to five shillings per year) the editors were including local photographs. Advertisements were kept discreetly to the back or front pages of each issue. In March 1908 for example there were 20 pages of advertisements (and an index to them) plus about 64 pages of short articles as diverse as the value of soot, the new disc stump-jump plough, export of frozen lambs and prickly pear eradication.
Sadly, publication was suspended from 1909 until January 1924. It was then re-established as Series 2, published quarterly. Copies were offered free on application to those involved or interested in agriculture, but threepence per copy was charged to interstate subscribers.

Longer articles had become more usual by the 1920s. The Director of Agriculture, George Sutton, contributed eight pages in September 1925 on calculating the weight of hay stacks and the capacity of tanks and dams. Farmers' wives were not forgotten and Miss M.A. Wylie, inspectress and organiser of Domestic Science Classes, began a series of articles on the science of cookery at this time.
By 1928 the cover was being printed in colour which continued through the 1930s until a new style using black and white photographs came into vogue in 1938. In 1952 a new editor, J.A. (Jack) Mallett, decided it should become the Third Series with a fresh look and price cut from one and threepence to one shilling per copy. Frequency increased to six issues a year and while printing was almost all black and white, the use of photographs, diagrams and other graphic aids was extended.

Individual issues ran to 180 pages, with more than 900 pages during a single year. Academic qualifications were now considered important and the authors' by-lines included university degrees to enhance their authority. Recipes, knitting patterns and hints on cleaning silver were included. In 1960 E.H. (Eric) Lawson M.Sc. [agric] took over as editor and began a Fourth Series. Publication reverted to monthly.

Visual changes

Visually, the 1970s were probably the Journal's most changeable times. Colour printing was used increasingly, but outside advertisements were discontinued. Three different page sizes were used over the decade and it reverted from monthly to quarterly from 1972 when less emphasis was given to practical farming recommendations. At this time the Department believed practical advice could be disseminated more rapidly and economically through the commercial mass media and its Agricultural and Pastoral Memos. Instead, emphasis in the Journal was to be on 'in depth' reviews of research and its application, the economic and seasonal situations and general Department of Agriculture policies and activities. (Publication and distribution of the single sheet Farmnotes for extension information began in 1974.)

By 1978 production throughout was in full colour, as today, and subscriptions had risen to $2 a year.

During the 1980s computers began to be used increasingly and now design, layout and typesetting are all done internally by the Information and Media Services Branch staff using the latest in computer desk top publishing technology.

Regular subscribers, or those who purchase an occasional issue for $4 a copy, probably assume its publication to be normal, but the Western Australian Journal of Agriculture is now unique in Australia. Cost-cutting exercises in other States have caused the equivalents to stop publication. Its future in this State is also in doubt, but while it survives please enjoy!

The OLIVER PLough.

This is a Plough we strongly recommend for general farming purposes, being light, strong, and durable.

BEWARE OF SPURIOUS IMITATIONS.