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C V. Malcolm

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BLUEBUSH SEED SUPPLIES

By C. V. MALCOLM, B.Sc. (Agric.), Soils Division

A GREAT deal of publicity has been given of late to the value of bluebush (Kochia brevifolia) as a plant for some types of salt-affected land, particularly in the drier parts of the wheatbelt. Obtaining seed supplies can be a problem, but fortunately large amounts of seed are not required since once a few bushes are established they will spread seed over the intervening areas. Thus rates of 1 to 2 lb of seed per acre have been found quite satisfactory.

At present, the only suppliers of the seed in commercial quantities are Elder, Smith and Co. Ltd., Perth. However bluebush is very widespread in our wheatbelt and it is likely that for any property on which there are suitable areas for bluebush establishment there is a bluebush occurrence within 20 miles. This may not apply in the North-Eastern Wheatbelt districts. Some good areas are at Carnamah, Buntine, Dalwallinu, Quairading, Bruce Rock, Narembeen, Kulin (east) and Lake Grace. In some cases, bluebush has overrun vacant land in country towns, as at Bruce Rock. In other areas it forms stands in road and rail reserves and in small unused paddocks. The harvesting by hand of sufficient seed to start bluebush in a salty area is quite simple.

The bushes may produce seed any time between November and July, but production is most prolific about February-March. Flowering and seed-ripening is a continuous process. Thus at any one time there may be young flower buds blooming flowers and ripe seeds in large numbers on the one bush. In collecting seed it is best to use a super bag with a wire hoop sewn into the mouth to hold it open. The bag is held in one hand and with the other branches are pushed inside the bag and shaken vigorously to dislodge all seed. It is possible under good conditions to collect 3 lb. of seed in an hour. Bushes with light crops of seed give much lower yields. It is well worth while to spend some time in finding the most heavily-laden bushes and harvest from these.

The shaking process results in a seed sample which contains, apart from hundreds of insects, large numbers of fleshy green leaves and a fair proportion of unripe seed. Adequate opportunity for drying is essential if this seed is to be of any use. Drying can be achieved by spreading the seed in a layer one to two inches thick away from strong wind and moisture. When the material is thoroughly dry it may be bagged and stored in a dry place. What appear to be open pink flowers in the original sample will on drying ripen to give good viable seeds.

Seed cannot be stored under normal conditions for more than a few months. It must therefore be sown in the year in which it is collected.

The germination of a good sample should be about 90 per cent. though in establishment on salt land it is not likely that more than 30 per cent. of seed sown produces plants, and in most cases very much lower counts results. Trials are in progress aimed at raising these figures and eliminating some establishment hazards.
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