The Merredin Early strain of Wimmera ryegrass

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WITH the exception of subterranean clover, no introduced pasture species has a wider application in Western Australia than Wimmera ryegrass. This popular pasture plant is believed to have originated as a natural cross between two ryegrass species and first became prominent in the Wimmera district of Victoria.

The hybrid origin of the plant probably accounts for the very wide variability which occurs among individual plants grown from the commercial seed. The average commercial sample of seed will produce plants which mature and set seed at varying times over a fairly lengthy period, and also show a very wide variation in their growth habits.

Some may be tall and erect while others tend to be short with the stalks and leaves spreading outward rather than upward. Some plants are spindly and sparsely-leaved while others stool out and produce a dense stand of leafage.

PLANT IMPROVEMENT

About 20 years ago, plant breeders commenced to utilise this variation to produce better strains of Wimmera ryegrass, giving particular attention to the very early-maturing types.

At the Merredin Research Station in 1941, a number of single plant selections were made from bulk pastures and from field experiments with Wimmera ryegrass. Seven years later, 140 plants were selected from a paddock on the Avondale Research Station. These were found to be earlier and more prolific than the commercial strain and were subsequently transferred to Merredin for comparison with the material selected there.

From this work emerged two lines—one from Avondale and the other from Merredin. Both were similar in characteristics, being more vigorous and approximately a week to ten days earlier in maturity than...
the commercial strain. Seed multiplication plots of each were sown at Merredin and critically compared. The Avondale strain appeared to be slightly more prolific, and prior to its release for general cultivation it was formally named "Merredin Early Strain" in allusion to its general suitability for this area and also to its final selection on the Merredin Research Station.

Because of its very early maturity this strain has been found to become established and persist in the drier districts with a shorter season, giving very encouraging results on areas which had previously failed to support the commercial strain. Also, because of its ability to withstand drier conditions, "Merredin Early Strain" is considered more suitable than the later strains in assisting towards the reclamation of areas where high salt concentrations present a serious problem in the establishment of any cover. It also persists better in subterranean clover pastures and gives better re-establishment after cereal cropping. The greater uniformity and more even maturity of the strain is an advantage when harvesting seed.

The initial pure line with 15 selected plants was sown in 1953 and the first bulk seed was distributed in 2 lb. lots to 69 farmers early in 1955. Since then pedigree seed of "Merredin Early" has been produced each year for general sale to farmers. The strain undergoes continual selection - for the maintenance of purity in exactly the same manner as pedigree cereal seed and is the only pasture species at present commercially available to receive this type of close supervision.

Recommended procedures for establishment and maintenance of "Merredin Early" are identical with those generally relating to Wimmera ryegrass and no special measures are necessary.

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