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PYP GRASS
(Ehrharta villosa)

By P. E. RYAN, B.Sc. (Agric.), Agrostologist

From time to time inquiries are received for identification of grass which is found growing near the sea shore. This grass is known as pyp grass (Ehrharta villosa) and is related botanically to veldt grass which is so familiar to visitors to King’s Park. It does not resemble veldt grass in its habit of growth and the relationship is mainly in the nature of the seed-head. Unlike veldt grass it spreads by means of underground rhizomes which may stretch for 15 to 20 ft. from the parent plant under suitable conditions. From these rhizomes new shoots occur at 12 to 18 inch spaces along the rhizome and give rise to new plants.

An area of about two acres carrying this grass was located some 12 or 13 years ago by Mr. L. Weston, Forestry Officer at Busselton. It was located on the sand-dunes at the mouth of the Margaret River and on the land side of marram grass which had been planted in the area. In this region pyp grass had naturalised and spread. It was tried near the mouth of Ellenbrook in the same region and there was found to thrive on the poor sandy soils. At Gnarabup marram grass which had been sown on the sand hills failed, but pyp grass grew successfully right down to the shore line.

Mr. T. Lennox of Ellenbrook has planted this grass on sand-dunes on his property with a fair amount of success. Throughout this region of country other patches are known and the grass has become more or less naturalised and is spreading over an area six miles long and several
Fig. 2.—A prolific growth of pyp grass alongside a track in the Margaret River area.

miles wide. Other plantings of this grass have been made at Ludlow and Hithergreen where the grass has established successfully, but has not spread to any extent.

Experimental plantings made on sandhills in the vicinity of Rockingham grew vigorously and produced underground rhizomes 15 ft. in length in one season. Above-ground shoots from these rhizomes reached a height of up to 3 ft.

On the sandy soils at Crawley this grass makes vigorous growth and responds to applications of nitrogenous fertiliser. On heavy loam soils at Wokalup pyp grass survived over a period of four or five years, but failed to make very strong growth and did not spread from the original sowings.

This grass produces coarse green stems with very few short leaves. The green stems are capable of doing the same work of photosynthesis as leaves. It is not very palatable to stock, but sheep appear to develop a taste for it in some conditions and at Crawley stands of pyp grass have been grazed down consistently by sheep.

It is damaged by fire which apparently destroys the shallow underground rhizomes. The grass is obviously useful for sand-binding purposes, on coastal sand-dunes and may provide some grazing for sheep in such areas.
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