

## Native Grasses of the ACT

Canberra is an exciting place in which to explore native grasslands and discover native grasses. While the immense plains of these grasslands have largely disappeared under urban Canberra, there are still many interesting and valuable remnant patches left, many within easy reach of the urban areas.

The ACT's indigenous grasses are more dramatic than you might think, and the variety would surprise you. There are over 80 different species in Namadgi National Park alone.

Four common ACT grasses are described in this leaflet, selected to give you an idea of the range of size and form which our indigenous grasses offer.

We hope that this brief glimpse of some local grass species will give you a taste for native grasses as potential landscape plants. From the tiniest courtyard to larger public landscapes, there is a place for native grasses.

**Further reading:** *Grassland Flora a field guide for the Southern Tablelands (NSW & ACT)*  
David Eddy et al (1998)

Available at the Botanical Bookshop and ANPS monthly meetings



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*Themeda australis*  
Kangaroo grass

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public landscapes, there is a place  
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## *Joycea pallida* syn *Chionochloa pallida* Red Anther Wallaby Grass

Indigenous to the high country of NSW and Victoria as well as the ACT, *Joycea pallida* is one of the commonest and most conspicuous native grasses in the ACT. It is often the tallest grass you can see, forming a tussocky, dominant understorey under a light canopy of eucalypts.

A good place to see this grass is in the higher parts of the Australian National Botanic Gardens, surrounded by a variety of pea-flowered plants, wattles (*Acacia*) and other woodland species. It is often found on poor stony or clay soils and is well suited to the soil and weather conditions in Canberra. The leaves (each about 2mm wide) form a rugged tussock up to 90cm high and the same wide. Older leaves dry to a soft straw grey, providing an interesting textural contrast to the green of the newer leaves. The height including flower spikes can be up to 1.75m.

Try and see it in full flower in spring - the colours will surprise you. The brilliant orange-red anthers hang suspended from the flowers on nearly invisible filaments, while purple feather-like stigmas project from the sides. The flower spikes remain held aloft on tall stems, and gradually turn a wonderful golden straw colour, looking a little like slim ears of wheat as the seeds ripen.

Rosellas are attracted to the seeds as they ripen. Even after the seed has been shed, the husks remain on their pale gold stems, providing height and drama through winter. Late afternoon light shining through a stand of *Joycea pallida* is a beautiful sight, emphasising the golden semi-transparency of the flower stems and texture of the tussocks.

You can't go past the rugged beauty of *J. pallida* to provide a truly 'Canberra bushland' atmosphere in your garden.

## *Poa labillardieri* River Tussock

Found in all States of Australia except Western Australia, this beautiful tussock grass inhabits grassland and grassy woodland in the ACT. It has a softer, less rugged appearance than *Joycea pallida*. It forms a tussock up to 1.3m wide and 1m tall in good conditions. The individual leaves are about 2mm wide, and while similar in shape, often have a slightly bluer colour. The fine flowering stems reach 1.2m tall, producing a fine feathery spray of flowers - often purplish when in bud - in contrast to the stiffer wheat-like spikes of the former species. This species can be grown from seed or tussock division. Plants have been available commercially, though only from a few limited sources.

## *Themeda triandra* syn *T australis* Kangaroo Grass

Kangaroo grass is generally found in open grasslands, and is native to all states of Australia. *Themeda* is also a tussock grass, much smaller than the previous two species and usually not exceeding 25cm. Leaf colour varies seasonally from green to blue green. The distinctiveness of Kangaroo Grass is displayed in its flower spikes. The triangular, bunched flower heads are borne on stems that grow to about 90cm tall. The flowers go through an interesting series of colour changes as they mature. They change from green/reddish brown when in bud and early flower, to a rich reddish-pink colour in summer and autumn as the seed matures and falls. The distinctive feature is the very prominent seed heads. It is an extremely hardy species and very amenable to cultivation.

## *Austrodanthonia carphoides* syn *Danthonia carphoides* Short Wallaby Grass

While not widely grown, this is a very common species of the ACT and surrounds. It grows as small blue-green tussocks 10 cm high and 10 cm wide. The flower spikes rise to 20 cm tall, with fluffy seed heads appearing at maturity. This charming little grass gives every indication of being as tough and adaptable as its larger relatives, and would make an excellent addition to the palette of native grasses becoming available for landscaping.

## Sources of grasses – Obtaining Seed

Please do not be tempted to collect your own seed or plants from public areas in the ACT - this is illegal, as it is in most States. If you know someone on a rural property, you may well be able to obtain seed from them. If collecting grass seed, remember to only collect a small quantity of seed. Preferably do not collect from plants near roads, paths or disturbed or grazed areas, as this seed assists in re-colonising such sites.

When collecting seed, be sure it is mature. Summer is one of the best times to collect seeds, and to test ripeness, gently stroke your hand along the seed heads. If some seed falls into your hand, that seed is ripe (a useful test for most grasses). Many Australian grass seeds have a dormancy period after maturing. This can vary from 4-12 months. When collected, seed should be allowed to dry, then be stored in a sealed container in a cool dark place. Sowings can be started from after about 6 months in storage.

Seeds of several ACT grass species are available to Society members through our seedbank. New members are welcome.

## Obtaining Plants

These species are not often found in nurseries, but there are some starting to appear, in response to public demand. Yarralumla Nursery is a good source, and the Society tries to have some grasses at its twice yearly plant sales. Some smaller nurseries also have a small supply of grasses. Existing tussocks can be divided and made into a larger number of plantlets.

## Conclusion

Writing in the press a few years ago, a native grass expert said despairingly 'Australians are arses when it comes to native grasses'. We think that Australians will prove him wrong once landscapers and home gardeners discover the drama and beauty that indigenous grasses can provide in any landscape setting.