

### Bringing the bush to town

Use native grasses in our city parks? At first glance this doesn't seem a very startling idea. Yet, oddly, nearly 200 years after settling this continent, we still don't. At last, two or three city planning departments are thinking about using them.

Native grasses have two major advantages over the introduced clovers and ryegrasses so often sown as rough grass in our city parks—they need less water, and they do not require fertilizing. Quite probably they don't need as much mowing either, and from the aesthetic viewpoint they have a much greater range of colour.

But on the debit side, seed of native grasses is not available, and we don't know how to manage them since all our past research has gone into studying species useful to the farmer.

Realizing this, Canberra's National Capital Development Commission approached the CSIRO Division of

Plant Industry's ecology section for advice, and the section has now embarked on a 3-year research program. The CSIRO team is looking at the local native grasses' life habits in detail so that vital questions about their management can be answered. It is also studying ways of making their seeds germinate and their seedlings grow.

Under the direction of Dr Richard Groves, leader of the team, Mr Charlie Chan, Mr Colin Totterdell, and Mr Mike Hagon began their studies by surveying a large valley to the south of Canberra to show what grasses dominated where. This valley will be the site of Tuggeranong—a new town that will eventually be home for 170 000 people. Perhaps the colours that the native grasses give to the landscape could be used to enhance this new town's setting.

The research group found that a band of a now uncommon type of grassland—kangaroo grass—stretches along the hillsides to the

west of the Murrumbidgee river. Part of this belt surrounds a large piece of land near the future town centre, and the grass may be used to advantage.

Back before European settlement, the land that now surrounds Canberra looked different. Every year, during autumn and early winter, russet kangaroo grass covered the plains thigh-deep—a pleasing sight indeed. Today this type of grassland has all but disappeared, as a result of more than a century of continuous sheep grazing.

But the fact that the grass did not survive heavy grazing does not mean that it wouldn't thrive in city parks—indeed it still does thrive in railway reserves, graveyards, and other protected land.

Bearing this in mind, the ecologists have made preliminary suggestions about how to maintain a kangaroo grass sward in an urban setting. A more detailed and possibly different management recipe will emerge as knowledge accumulates.

They suggest that it should not be fertilized. Where practicable the area should be fired every 2–3 years, but where burning is impracticable it should be mown each year to a height of about 7–10 cm, the litter being left to mulch itself in. In a climate like Canberra's, with a cold winter, both burning and mowing should be left until August, say, after the grass has died down.

A similar pattern of mowing may suit *Bothriochloa*—a native grass now common around Canberra. During late summer and autumn this grass's reddish colour can enhance the landscape.

'Natural Grasslands in Canberra.' C. W. Chan, C. J. Totterdell, and R. H. Groves. (CSIRO Division of Plant Industry: Canberra 1974.)

