

# Patience key to summer grass pasture success

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Binnaway (central west NSW) farmers John Purcell "Claremont" and Col Frost "Colcurra" are typical examples of success on a large scale with pasture improvement based on summer growing perennial grass pastures.

Lucerne is important to both farmers on their non-acid loam country, but it has not suited the lighter acid soils. Lime will correct surface acidity but most of the district light soils are also acid at depth. Lime takes a long time to change these. Also when cattle form the only livestock enterprise, as is the case with both these properties, non-bloating grass based pastures, for at least some of the area, are considered an asset.

Apart from being productive, summer perennial grasses have also proven very competitive against summer problem weeds such as spiny burr grass, blue heliotrope, catheads, and burrs. With good pastures these weeds have now ceased to be an issue.

Annual legumes such as serradella, sub clover, biserrula, arrowleaf clover, and persian clover complement the summer grasses, together with annual grasses such as annual ryegrass. Correcting sulphur and phosphorus deficiency, which in turn ensures the legumes fix adequate levels of nitrogen, has been fundamental to the successful pasture improvement program on both properties.

Consol lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*) and Premier digit grass (*Digitaria*) have been the main perennials used by Col Frost and John Purcell, although both are increasingly leaning to the latter. Premier is a slower maturing species, and stays in the more palatable vegetative stage longer, especially if dry conditions predominate. Consol is considered very productive, and is better

managed when grown in smaller paddocks.

In big paddocks summer perennials tends to get away following good spring/summer/early autumn rains and unless large numbers of stock are available much of the feed can become rank. This tends to be a problem more with faster maturing species than slower ones. But in drier years no one complains about excess rank feed and the greater the production the better.

Establishment is always a key area in summer perennial establishment. Both farmers have regularly experienced what initially appears to be a "non" establishment, but patience invariably results in success. For example, Col Frost sowed a Premier digit pasture, with an array of winter legumes, in late March 2001. Some digit plants established that autumn (summer grasses don't germinate in winter) but the pasture was mostly a winter annual one and was well grazed through the 2001 spring.

While the season has been well below average for the past 20 months, a good February 2002 rain saw digit plants establish well across the paddock. As is typical of summer grasses, once establishment occurred (given reasonable rainfall), plants developed quickly and full grazing commenced six weeks later.

Sowing times vary between farmers and success has occurred from sowings in spring, summer, and early autumn. In the case of consol a lot of success has also occurred from traditional autumn/winter sowing. But plants are often not seen until well into the next summer. Most other summer perennial grasses, such as Premier digit, don't reliably establish successfully from winter sowing.