1997 OTWAY GREENING AUTUMN NEWSLETTER

After the driest and hottest summer period for many years, it sure is a welcome relief to be experiencing some rain even if it is mid May. I'm sure everyone was holding their breath when those first few drops started to fall from the sky. And the clouds didn't let us down- the rain just kept on falling.

Results of last years' tree planting season have been a mixed bag. We all remember last winter- it didn't stop raining. In fact many landowners had difficulties in finding a few days of sunshine to apply their preplanting herbicides. Thus, when the rain did stop in October, many of us were already weeks behind schedule. Normally this wouldn't have been a concern. However, last spring was anything BUT normal! It turned out hot and dry baking the ground very quickly so by the time our spraying was effective many of us were planting trees into dry, hard topsoil. Not to mention that silage, hay, and shearing were also on the go put our tree planting even further towards the end of the year.

I guess all that is the Bad News. The Good News is that many of the trees that were planted last spring have not only survived the dry, they have thrived in it. Let's look at some of the reasons. Of course, correct preparation of the planting sites has to be the main factor in good tree growth. Soil moisture would have been at a premium this summer so those landowners who kept the weed competition to a minimum benefited greatly. I've noticed a number of weed infested newly planted tree lines in my travels around the region this summer. Thistles and fat hen seemed to be especially prevalent. These weeds in particular are huge users of soil moisture. If you can afford the time, two applications of herbicide prior to planting will help deplete that store of viable weed seed sitting in the soil just waiting to germinate. The first application of herbicide (knockdown) should be applied soon. The second application should be 1-4 weeks prior to planting depending on herbicide(s) used. Don't be caught out like we did last year. Be prepared for some fine weather to get that first application completed.

The other reasons why many trees did well this year are environmental. Of course native species (especially those indigenous to their planting sites) have learnt to live with the harsh climate(and local conditions) that we have in Australia. Many of the trees that were planted between October and early December last year (and had good weed control) were able to survive the following dry months because their roots were already down into the subsoil where moisture was still accessible. Native trees are very efficient water users. They also enjoy warmth. So with their roots accessing soil moisture, the plants were growing very quickly because of the above average temperatures we experienced. I'll also be the first to admit that the 2" of rain many of us received in January saved many of the young tree seedlings that hadn't yet found that subsoil moisture.

Planting of the correct species would have been another contributing factor to survival. The local species have been firing this year. So have the salt tolerant species collected from the Barwon Park Salinity Trial. Melaleuca halmaturorum(salt paperbark) and Eucalyptus occidentalis(swamp yate) have grown exceptionally well in some extremely difficult saline discharge sites. Melaleuca ericifolia(swamp paperbark) hasn't performed as well as the other two in extreme conditions.

Of course the one tree that certainly has taken landowners by storm is the blue gum. And the newly planted woodchip plantations certainly stand out with their shiny blue foliage against the backdrop of brown paddocks. I am concerned, however, that we shouldn't throw all our eggs into the one basket especially in marginal rainfall areas(below 650mm). With extremely quick growth rates, and the possibility of making a profit on blue gums, some landowners are planting blue gums exclusively in shelterbelts and windbreaks. This could be a problem in years to come when the trees are 30 metres tall and the wind is howling through the tree trunks, providing little shelter up close to the trees. Blue gums(and other gums) are also very susceptible to insect attack when planted in areas devoid of natural predators ie Western Plains.

Diversifying the species within the windbreak will help provide an environment that attracts birds/mammals/insects that will feed on the insects that are defoliating your blue gums. Just some of these "environmentally aware" plant species include: Sweet Bursaria, Prickly Moses, Prickly Tea Tree, Black Wattle and Scented Paperbark. Planting these and other 'non commercial' species along side the taller gums will also improve the wind filtering ability of the windbreak. A three row windbreak is usually the absolute minimum depth of any plantation. More rows may be necessary depending on how large the paddock is that you are trying to protect.

As to supply of species that are available this spring, many of our Lannen speedlings are already sold. Blue gum, shining gum, red gum, Casuarina glauca, and the salt tolerant paperbarks are still available in quantities. As to tube stock, most species are still available, although with the rains spring orders have started coming in. So if you are considering tree planting this spring, don't wait too long. Order now and you will get the trees that you want. Now that the rains have come let's hope we can squeeze a little sunshine out of the sky to get a bit of feed growing out there in the paddock. Hope you have a good winter!

Yours,

Mike Robinson-Koss