

Hello and welcome to the latest installment of our OG newsletter. This is our 12th annual newsletter, one which finds many tree planters and farmers asking some hard questions about climate, rainfall and tree mortality. It also finds some tree growers like ourselves, asking if we need to do anything differently in the growing of plants so the seedlings will survive possibly drier/hotter conditions. Please read on, and don't forget about our 3rd of December deadline in ordering your Otway Greening plants.

The following article was written by Mike Robinson-Koss for "Tree Talk" magazine to be published November 2006.

THOUGHTS ON A CLOUDLESS DAY

Was that a winter we just had? Is this a spring we are now just getting to the end of? Do we all have to rethink how and when we plant trees? Do we have to think outside of the indigenous circle of plants used for reveg projects due to a drying climate? Questions questions...

The 2006 tree planting season must have certainly been the shortest I've ever experienced. It went up in a puff of 30 degree days sometime late in September. It only reiterates that most important detail about tree planting- be prepared. Plan early, order early, ring contractors early, and in a dry year, spray and plant early. You have to be flexible. There's no point in planting in early October because "that's when we've always done it" if the season is a month

ahead of schedule (like 2006). Some of you flatlanders will be saying something like "well if the dry doesn't kill our trees the -3 degrees will! And you're probably right. This planting season has been extraordinary. The big question is, how extra ordinary is it?

Are we to be faced with similar situations in the future? Our climate is changing. No one in their right mind can argue with that! Atmospheric carbon levels are at unprecedented levels which is warming our planet. I believe we are experiencing the effects of global warming at this very moment. And as a group of committed carers of the land, we must do our bit in this battle we find ourselves in.

I can only say that in a warming climate, our role as tree planters is even more important than it ever was. Most of us now understand the on-farm benefits of tree planting (shelter, erosion control, beautification, etc) and the catchment benefits (water quality, salinity control, biodiversity, etc), but our global responsibilities are now becoming more apparent, hitting us square in the rain gauge. We are being challenged to plant trees (and crops and pastures) in a more unpredictable climate. But that is what we must do. The planting of trees as carbon sinks to utilise carbon from our atmosphere is one very important way you and I can do our bit.

So now that the 2006 tree planting season is over, what have we learned from it? How can we get smarter in this ever changing, volatile climate we live in? How about starting with some navel gazing. How are your trees doing that were planted this year? Are they stuffed or are they chuffed? Are they growing? Have some died? Which ones have died? Which ones are thriving? When did you spray? When did you plant? Did you plant earlier than usual? Did you use guards? All of these questions, and more, are going to be useful (no, vital) if we are to continue the successful work of landcare into the future. If we don't learn from this past year and talk with each other about our successes and failures then we will miss a great opportunity to tackle this issue at the local level.

The challenge is OURS.

OUT IN THE PADDOCKS.....Since writing the above article we have been looking at many of this year's plantings trying to work out which ones worked and which ones didn't. Of course, we found no hard and fast rules- too many variables on individual blocks of land to be able to compare them with other plantings, however, one thing was common in many situations- the little seedlings sure didn't like those hot northerly winds in late September, and particularly on 12 October when we got close to 36 degrees C. Even where soil moisture was sufficient the seedling roots were not yet incorporated into the surrounding soil to counteract the leaf burn caused by the hot winds. As of early November, those seedlings with sufficient soil moisture have survived and even with burnt or dead leaves are sending out adventitious buds below their bark to replace the dead leaves. Your trees may be in this situation. Have a close look, usually at the base of the seedling or in old leaf nodes, young shoots will be growing. This means that the roots are working, they are finding some soil moisture and they have healed old wounds.

It is impossible to say exactly, but frost certainly was a factor in tree mortality in many areas. Because soils were drier and skies were clearer, frosts were more prevalent and more damaging especially out on the plains. One farmer counted 49 frosts this year!

One thing for certain is that if you planted your trees on or before 23rd September (at least in the inland districts), they had a better chance of survival. Why? On the 24th September we had 18mm of rain so any trees planted before then were watered in well. However, after the 24th we had 23 days of very little rain (total of only 6mm for that period) and those hot days to throw into the equation. Of course, we can only see this in hindsight. Every year there is a date where trees should have been planted by. That date (if the 23rd is correct) was about 3-4 weeks earlier than usual. Not only that but depending on your location, some trees should have been in even earlier. Those of you out at Winch would probably attest to that.



Mikala Robinson-Koss and Cath Greenon at work under the old blackwood tree

IN THE NURSERY.....Most of you already know how we try to grow tough plants by minimising fertiliser use and germinating/growing plants outdoors. Normally we grow our plants so they reach an optimum size around April. They remain at that height over winter, putting on bark and hardening up. However, because of the warmer conditions (the usage of time release fertiliser is dependent on temperature), trees continued to grow over the winter. In some species, height was a problem, affecting the root/shoot ratio. We pruned the tops out of some wattle species to help counteract potential transpiration loss through too many leaves.

But what about next year? We plan on growing our same range of species and of course, we can be very specific with your provenance requirements. Please give us a bell or email about your 2007 plant order. As to our water supply, like many others, our dams are lower than usual, but if we are careful and diligent we can get through the coming summer. If you plan on ordering, please do so sooner than later as we will have to be fairly strict on how many plants we grow and, of course, it will be first come, best dressed when it comes to orders.

AROUND THE REGION.....Some of you may not know this but in 2006 Landcare officially celebrated 20 years as a viable rural conservation movement. It is one of the most successful organisations of its kind in the world. It started in Victoria, has spread to every part of the country and is now very successful overseas. There are hundreds of Landcare groups in the Philippines, South Africa, UK, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and a dozen other countries. A wonderful export product for Australia to produce for the world.

To celebrate the 20th anniversary, the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority has commissioned a film celebrating Landcare in our region. Interviewing people from every corner of the region the film highlights the achievements of Landcare groups, schools and individuals who contributed to sustainable land stewardship in their districts. The film runs for 23 minutes and will be available early in 2007 from the Corangamite CMA office in Colac.

CLIMATE CHANGE ON THE AGENDA.....

I guess it was bound to happen eventually. The pollies have discovered they need to actually do something about our climate and that it might need some very forward thinking and a bipartisan approach looking way beyond 3 year terms. It's amazing what a drought can do to bring things to a head! Now I've got that off my chest, why wait for the pollies to lead the way? What are we able to do in our own little way to help reduce our own "carbon footprint". Besides some of the obvious ways (recycling, reusing, reducing, solar hot water, fuel efficient vehicles, etc), have you heard about some of the interesting programs around dealing with carbon sinks and trading. About 3 years ago the Victorian Government's Carbon Tender program was started. Under this scheme, landowners would be paid to plant indigenous trees/shrubs. According to their website, these plantings will help reduce Victoria's greenhouse emissions by 8.3 million tonnes per year by 2010. Unfortunately the program was only a trial so we shall see if they believe it worthy of continuing into the future.



Yes, the hill is THAT steep but at least we're lugging the milk cartons DOWN the hill. Mike, Cath and photographer Wendy planted this CarbonTender plantation at Forrest

Two other schemes run on a different line. Treemart and Greenfleet both help people offset their carbon

emissions by planting trees in rural areas. Individuals pay an upfront fee to the organisations who then invest that money in tree plantations. Treemart aims to harvest the plantations for timber products (carbon remains locked up in the wood) in the future whilst Greenfleet focuses on permanent revegetation projects. If you have land available, you may be able to be paid to plant these carbon sinks on your property. If you'd like to offset the carbon your vehicle produces (ave. 4.3 tonnes per year) you can subscribe to these organisations or, if you have the space, you'll need to plant 0.2 hectares of eucs per year (according to the Treemart website).

A PASSION FOR PROPAGATION.....

Well, back in the nursery, seed trays are filling up many benches with all sorts of weird and not so weird indigenous plant species. Our summer sowing is just beginning while we are currently transplanting those wonderful winter germinants. And speaking of winter germinants, we get many enquiries about grass trees (black boys) and, yes, we do grow them and yes, they are slow growing! Because of their unique and fine root system they need to be fairly advanced before they can be planted out in situ. We grow them in forestry tubes where their roots can establish well and it takes 2 years before the plants are ready for sale. Drainage is vital for a healthy root system, both in the nursery and on your property so good soil prep is necessary if you are willing to give them a go. Many people are familiar with the Austral Grass Tree (*Xanthorrhoea australis*) which, in the Otways grows in many heathland districts ie Anglesea, Forrest, Carlisle, and many other smaller patches. This species usually only flowers after disturbances such as fire. An amazing sight to behold is a large area of grass trees in flower with 2-3m long flower spikes loaded with nectre and butterflies flitting about everywhere.

For those who may not have the right soil conditions, there is another species of grass tree that you may find worthy of trying. The Small Grass Tree (*X. minor*) grows in heathy woodlands (with messmate, brown stringy, peppermint, etc) and usually grows to about knee high. It rarely forms a trunk but tends to flower every year regardless of fire. It sends up 1-4 spikes per plant which may be 1-1.5m long so in the modern garden quite a display can be had. They are a bit more forgiving when it comes to soil and drainage and a flowering display will certainly come earlier than their larger, slower growing cousins.

Well that about wraps it up for another OG newsletter and just another reminder about getting in early with your order and PLEASE, if you have any of our Lannen trays from previous years could you return them ASAP. Much appreciated!

Regards, Mike and Wendy