



Understorey Network

Summer Newsletter 2005
No. 30

CONTACT DETAILS

Please note these new details.

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Growers Scheme Coordinator South

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Visit our website and Plant Propagation Database at:

www.understorey-network.org.au

USN Steering Committee 2004/5

President: Anne Griffiths Ph: 62 641896

Vice President: Helen Morgan Ph: 0429 197 671

Secretary: Mary Jolly Ph: 62 278506

Treasurer: Peter McGlone Ph: 62 343552

Other Committee Members:

Brian Griffiths , Liz Quinn, Anna Povey

Louise Jerrim.

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President's Report

After two years of not knowing what the future held for the Understorey Network, or indeed if it even had a future, we've come out of the doldrums and once again are flying! We have received a grant through the Natural Heritage Trust to continue but with a slightly different focus, which is explained elsewhere in this newsletter. Special thanks must go to Liz, Helen and Anna who never gave up, and without whom we would not be in the great position we are in to-day. Thank you too to all you members who had enough faith and belief in what the USN tries to achieve to retain your membership even though we were not able to offer you as much in the way of field days etc as we normally like to do.

The USN Co-ordinator position has been replaced by that of a Project Manager, who, as the name implies, will manage the various projects that we need to do to fulfill the requirements of our funding grant. More of the routine and mundane jobs in running the USN will be done by the committee members, much as we have done over the last two years.

Cont'd next page

President's Report cont'd

Our new Project Manager (our PM) is Ruth Mollison, who comes to us from a varied background which most recently included positions as an NRM facilitator in the North of the state, and as a Waterwatch co-ordinator. She has brought a great deal of enthusiasm to the position which is very infectious! She has been given an office at Greening Australia, and we look forward very much to working closely with GAT to our mutual benefit.

It is of course the old story of the more you put in, the more you get out. This is so true of my time with the USN since I first picked up an application form at Agfest several years ago. Since then, though I have always loved "the bush", I have come to appreciate more and more the uniqueness of our Tasmanian environment, and become passionate about the need to protect what we have left. It is disappearing so fast, and once it's gone it's very difficult, if not impossible, to get it back. After protection, regeneration is the next best bet. This is where the USN can play such an important role, not just by putting plants in the ground but by education and example for the people out there who want to do the right thing but don't quite know where to start.

I worry that the emphasis on protecting the "Old Growth Forests" detracts from the importance of preserving all the natural bush we have left. The USN, with its focus on the understorey as well as the canopy, and therefore by default on the biodiversity that is so important for our survival, fills a spot in the conservation movement that would otherwise be vacant.

But that's one of my (many) soapboxes, so I'll clamber down and wish you all the best for an exciting and interesting 2005 as a member of a dynamic group with so many important things to do. I hope to meet you all eventually at one of our field or education days, and finally - dare I suggest it?- at the Annual General Meeting in August!

President
Anne Griffiths



Kangaroo grass (*Themeda triandra*)

Hello from the Project manager



I'm looking forward to assisting the Understorey network continue its great work, and to maintaining the energy that has made it so successful. A large part of this success is due to the commitment from past coordinators - evident from the realms of paperwork, newsletters and files that I have been unpacking in my new office at Greening Australia. More recently, a strong committee and steadfast members has ensured the survival of the network over the lean times without a paid coordinator – no mean feat!

My title of 'Project Manager' rather than coordinator reflects the change of direction the network will be making. My position has been funded under the federal government Natural Heritage Trust program, to implement an Understorey network Project titled 'Growing Community and Plants Together'. The funding for this project is part of the regional NRM process where projects considered a 'priority' are funded before the final regional NRM strategies and Investment Proposals are accredited.

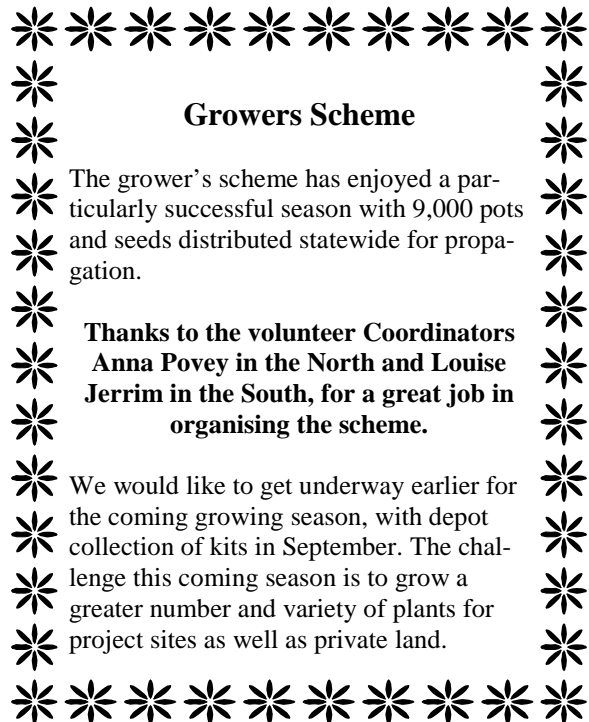
I'll be helping the Understorey Network 'plugin' to the NRM process, by identifying opportunities where we can provide advice and training plus support vegetation projects with seed collecting or growing. This is a great opportunity for the Understorey Network to become an indispensable part of regional NRM. More importantly, it will be an opportunity for members to be involved in some of the interesting environmental projects happening in our region.

The regional NRM investment proposals are yet to be finalised and released, however there are some recently funded National Landcare and envirofund projects that I will be investigating for Understorey network involvement in.

I am hosted by Greening Australia, which is proving very handy for Southern networking (as I'm an ex-Northerner!) with the added bonus that I'm close to our seed bank and will be delving into its depths via the Greening Australia database. Its also a great spot for coffee at Salamanca (at 110 Hampden Road, between Sandy Bay Road and Davey Street)– please feel free to drop in to the new Understorey Office, and introduce yourself.

I'm looking forward to an exciting and challenging 2005!

Ruth Mollison
Project Manager



Growers Scheme

The grower's scheme has enjoyed a particularly successful season with 9,000 pots and seeds distributed statewide for propagation.

Thanks to the volunteer Coordinators Anna Povey in the North and Louise Jerrim in the South, for a great job in organising the scheme.

We would like to get underway earlier for the coming growing season, with depot collection of kits in September. The challenge this coming season is to grow a greater number and variety of plants for project sites as well as private land.

Pots Needed!

If you no longer require your pots from the grower's kits –please return them to:
Greening Australia
110 Hampden Road Battery Point.
They are valued and re-used for the next season.

The Native Grass Menagerie

Thanks to Phil Watson for this article

Native grasses are once again being given the respect they deserve! Two hundred years of a 'remove and replace' attitude towards native grass-dominated habitats has now changed. Promote and enhance them at all costs is the new imperative!

This is reflected in the extent to which native grasses have successfully naturally regenerated in recent revegetation projects. This now provides one of the key success factors to be assessed when reviewing grassy community restoration projects.

Native grasses have also emerged as the plants of choice, for revegetating of degraded habitats and for establishing an exciting new landscape style based on mass plantings of native grasses. The new Melbourne Free-ways are a fine testament to this!

Now home gardeners can be rewarded for growing their own native grass-dominated landscapes with the colourful dainty herbs, lilies and bush peas, which juggle for position amongst these domineering tufty, native grasses. More importantly, within a growing season, they yield a menagerie of fascinating insects, birds and wildlife.

Their chequered history of use and abuse

Traditionally, grass-dominated habitats were an integral part of the aboriginal hunting and gathering life style. The sweet stem bases of Spear grass could be eaten like sugar cane. The Kangaroo, Spear and Tussock grass seeds could be ground into flour. With open palms, the aboriginal women could roll the tough fibrous leaves along their thighs to form a fine thread. A string could be plied from two or three threads and used to make dillies, mats and nets.

To attract kangaroo and harvest of bush tucker easily, aboriginals patch-burnt these grassy swards with hot fires to provide succulent 'green pick'. Only enough roos were killed to ensure that the many shrub and tree seedlings, which germinated after the hot fires, remained heavily grazed. This guaranteed that forest did not encroach across their valued grasslands, which now presents a deep problem for grassland managers.

In contrast to the aborigines, unaware farmers had little appreciation of the ecosystem services supplied by native grasses. For 200 years, native grasses suffered the onslaught of weed invasion, grazing, ploughing, fertilising, exotic pasture over-seeding and 5-acre sub-division. Frequent cool burning to force lush green shoots on Kangaroo grass paddocks proved clever at first, but finally degraded them. Weeds or spine tipped, wiry awned seeded Spear grasses, which ruined fleeces and pierced eyes and skin have replaced them. Only a few remnants now remain, located in unexpected sanctuaries such as cemeteries, road and rail reserves.

Introducing Native grasses and their roles

The palate of native grasses available for revegetation include Kangaroo Grass *Themeda triandra*, Wallaby grasses *Austrodanthonia sp.*, Spear grasses *Austrostipa sp.*, Plume Grasses *Dichelachne sp.*, Common Wheat-grass *Elymus scabrous*, Blown grasses *Agrostis sp.*, Tussock grasses *Poa sp.*, Weeping Grass *Microlaena stipoides*, Forest Wire Grass *Tetrarrhena distichophylla* as well as the coastal sand binding grasses of Hairy Spinifex *Spinifex sericeus*, Salt-grass *Distichlis distichophylla* and Coastal Fescue *Austrofestuca littoralis*.

They not only command respect for their role of sustaining the intricate web of native fauna and flora, but they also provide the filtering role for our watersheds. They soak up the rainfall so it can infiltrate slowly down into the depleted underground aquifers. Alternatively, they draining across and erode our precious soil. Within the urban landscape native grass landscapes are popular due to their natural beauty, drought tolerance, resistance to vandalism

and ease of maintenance. They now embellish many prestigious city landscapes and roadside plantings. Even florists are warming to the beauty of their unique flower heads, as seen in their new floral displays.

Habitat for Marsupials, Reptiles and Frogs

Kangaroos, Wallabies, Wombats and Pademelons feed on the aptly named Kangaroo and Wallaby grasses and their suites of inter-tussock herbs. Our small furry hop-alongs such as the Bettong, Southern Brown Bandicoot and Ringtail Possum all build nests for breeding, incorporating native grasses. It is a privilege to see a bettong with a tail coiled around a bundle of native grasses scurrying to build its nest! The Eastern Barred Bandicoot prefers the shelter of native grass tussocks to scratch for seeds and insects. They leave distinctive conical shaped holes in native grass patches after feeding on grubs which munching on the grass roots. Echidnas gorge

on the insect treats inhabiting the native grasses. A torchlight safari may reward the keen observer! Native grasses are also a favoured habitat for reptiles such as the Grass Skink, Copperhead, White Lipped and Tiger snakes, which feed on the smaller prey and insects living amongst the native grasses.

The Southern Toddled and Smooth Froglet breed in low lying grassy patches, laying their eggs, on the expectation that the area will be flooded in autumn. Since they walk rather than hop and do not lay their eggs in water, they are radically different to most frogs. However, for the snakes and echidnas they are just as tasty as the other frogs!

Birds thrive amongst native grass tussocks

Our native birds and even the nocturnal Greater and Lesser Long-Eared Bats scavenge grassy forest understoreys feeding on plump seed heads and insects. Pardalotes, Thornbills, Honeyeaters, Robins, Whistlers, Fantails, Wrens and the Welcome Swallow all line their nests with dried grasses interwoven with spider webs. Many of these birds busily collect 'beak fulls of nothing'. Closer inspection reveals a fine spider's silk being harvested. These birds, along with their mid to upper canopy feeding species, provide the key to preventing tree dieback. They are known to eat up to 70% of the leaf-feeding insects attacking the stressed trees. Remove or degrade the native grass understorey this ecosystem service rapidly declines as we see from the midlands highway.

Native grasses are ideal sites for web-producing spiders including the Wheel-web Spider. It spins its flimsy wheel-like web in an unusual horizontal position supported by the grass tussocks' intricate 3D architecture. They hang upside down under the web's hub. As they lack poison glands, they use their disproportional long front legs (it cannot walk on flat surfaces) to wrap and subdued their prey. By injecting digestive enzymes they liquefy and suck out the prey's flesh. Of course, birds pick them off like liquorice allsorts.

Habitats for Bees, Ants, Butterflies and Moths

Our small solitary native bees exploit the hollow grass flower stalks. They construct a series of pollen and honey filled cells, into which they lay their eggs. Each cell is sealed with waxy secretions and frass.

Many butterflies and moths larva have evolved to feed voraciously on native grasses. The White Grassdart lays its eggs on the *Danthonia sp.* and *Poa sp.* leaves which then hatch into pale green larva. These form a shelter by joining several leaves together. Here they pupate into butterflies that characteristically rest with its forewings held up over its body while its hind wings are held flat. The night feeding **Dominula** and **Tasmanian Skipper butterfly** larva also use silk to form a tubular shelter amongst *Poa sp.* Their butterflies feed on a range of native daisies in the inter-tussock spaces.

The **Common Brown butterfly** larva feed on Kangaroo Grass, whilst the in summer, adults frequent the flowers of the Native Box *Bursaria spinosa*.

Interestingly, the **Ptunarra Brown butterfly** relies totally on *Poa* tussock grasses for their larval food, adult habitat and sunning spots. After mating they drop their eggs, like a low flying bomber, on the tussocks. The larva hatch to feed on the tussock tips. In early autumn, they pupate from the tussock's base into weak-flying gregarious adults.

Conclusion

Grassy woodland communities are diverse systems of checks and balances. To remove any part (roos, wrens, spiders etc) or to add foreign components (sheep, fertilizers, weeds, cool burns etc) will cause a dramatic alteration to the rules under which it functions. Finally do not manage a small grassy remnant under the illusion that it functions like a miniature, extensive grassy woodland, as it responds to a distinctly different set of rules.

Phil Watson
pajwa@southcom.com.au

Seed Collecting Hints

Before you go

- Obtain permission from the landholder/council/government department.
- On the day you visit, pay a courtesy call to let the landholder know you have arrived .
- Leave gates as found – open or closed. Use existing roads/tracks where possible.
- Do not disturb stock. Leave dogs at home.

Things to take with you.

- Paper or cloth bags for seeds/pods. Plastic bags for ‘sweat’ seeds.
- Clean, sharp secateurs.
- Plant identification guides.
- Tags and pencils for labelling specimens.
- Markers, pegs or coloured tape for finding a plant once the flowers have gone.
- Pieces of stockings, rubber bands or string to make bags around developing seed heads, to catch seed as they fall.
- Camera – for help with identification or shots of the environment/habitat.

Back in the car

If you collect pieces for identification, or if you have cuttings to strike, it is a good idea to keep them cool so they don't wilt. For this, take wet newspaper to wrap the cuttings. An eski with ice bricks will keep them fresh.

Time to go Seed Collecting.

Generally seeds ripen throughout summer, so plan some trips starting late December. Plants set seed at different times, according to species and local habits and climatic variations. It's worth going regularly to catch seeds of different species. Some seed can also be collected throughout the year. A pleasant walk in Spring, among the flowers, is a good time to identify plants and mark them for later seed collection. Make sure you've got some seed in the capsule, before you collect a lot.

How do you know when the seed is ripe?

Observe colour changes of seeds, usually from green to brown, black or red when ripe. They usually become easier to remove from the plant. Then collect the seeds or the pods/capsules they are in, preferably by cutting with clean secateurs so as not to damage the plant.

Hard cone seeds sheoaks, banksias, tea trees and other Myrtaceae – collect the oldest cones that have not yet opened (ie. The valves should be closed). They will be greyish, and further down the stem than the younger and unripe cones.

These can be collected at anytime of year.

What if you miss seed ripening?

Some plants (eg. most Myrtaceae) hold onto their heads for a long time and so can be collected from at almost anytime of the year (see above). Others release their seeds almost immediately they are ripe, so it is easy to miss them. If you think The seed may drop while you are away, tie a bag around the fruit to catch the seed, ready for collection later. Old stockings make good bags.

What to do once you are home

If you collected into plastic bags, remember when you get home to move them into a paper or cloth bag so they don't go mouldy. Then just leave the bags somewhere warm and dry (in a cupboard, near the fire). Pods/capsules usually open quite easily, releasing their seeds into the bag. Store the seeds in a container, preferably in the fridge where they will last longer. The Network has cool store facilities in Hobart at Greening Australia. Label the container clearly with the date, location and plant name.

Some things to keep in mind,.

- Collect from healthy plants where possible. Collect above the ‘splash zone’ to avoid *phytophthora cinnamomi* contamination.
- Collect from at least ten seed plants of the same species, spread over at least 100m to ensure genetic diversity.
- Do not remove more than 25% of the available crop from any one plant. If the plant seems rare, bear in mind that seed collection is reducing the plant's ability to reproduce in its own environment.

Desperately Seeking Seeds and Seed Sorters

The Understorey network is running out of seed stock! Do you have native plant seeds in various containers you have collected and stored away?

Any native plant seed donations that are suitably labelled (ie.plant name, place and date) would be **VERY MUCH** appreciated.

ALSO WANTED: some experienced and/or willing volunteer seed sorters to clean and re-package seeds.

Please drop or mail any seed donations to: Ruth Mollison at Greening Australia,110 Hampden Road. PO Box 9868, Hobart 7001. If you can spare some time to assist with the seeds ring Ruth on 6223 6377.

Permits not required for growing threatened plant species in gardens.

In 2001 amendments were made to the Tasmanian *Threatened Species Protection Act 1995* relating to growing threatened plant species in domestic gardens. While this issue was promoted at that time (including the USN newsletter), I thought it worth while repeating the message. In short these changes make life easier for an honest home gardener who wants to grow threatened plants.

Sub-section 51(2) was inserted: "A person may take, keep or process, without a permit, a specimen of a listed taxon (species, sub-species or variant) of flora in a domestic garden."

Now, you DO NOT NEED A PERMIT for growing threatened plants in your garden:

- if the plant was in your garden when you purchased the property;
- you acquired the plant before the *Threatened Species Protection Act 1995* was created; or
- you purchased the plant from a nursery (however the nursery must have a permit).

PERMITS MUST STILL BE OBTAINED for selling, taking from the wild or releasing into the wild of any listed species. If you have a threatened plant in your garden that produces lots of seeds or seedlings, it may be damaging and is certainly illegal to plant them into nearby bushland or to sell them to others. You may spread diseases such as *Phytophthora* or cause genetic pollution. When you are collecting seeds or other plant material from bushland areas, you must be certain the plant is not a threatened species and if it is you need a collection permit.

If you have any concerns phone me or the Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment's Threatened Species Unit.

Peter McGlone
Threatened Species Network
Phone 03 6234 3552
tsntas@ozemail.com.au

FIELD DAYS

Summer Seed collecting and Plant Identification

SOUTH

Where: North Bruny Island at Quarantine Point

When: Sunday, 20th of February, 2005

Meet at Kettering ferry terminal for car pooling
At 9:00am

What to Bring: Paperbags and a pencil, field guides, secateurs and lunch.

This will be an interesting day's trip, with a lunch-time talk about the history of Quarantine Point, as well as a botanist to help identify plants, and demonstrate seed collecting methods. There may be an opportunity to purchase a book about the area, so bring some extra\$\$.

NORTH

Where: Bridport Wildflower Reserve,

Meet at the entrance to the Golf Course, with parking along the old tip road.

When: 2pm to approx. 4pm

What to Bring: Paperbags and a pencil, field guides, secateurs and a drink.

The wildflower reserve at Bridport is special for its diversity of coastal plants. Come along and learn about collecting seeds, and how to identify species.

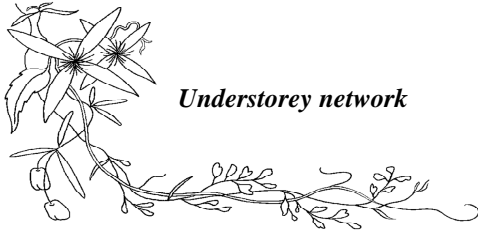
RSVP's on field day attendance is appreciated.

Ring Ruth Mollison on 6332 36377

Or Email: ruth.mollison@understorey-network.org.au.



Caladenia sylvicola
Photo by Hans and Annie



Understorey network

Membership Application

ABN 62 599 420 020

Annual membership: \$22 includes GST

Please post cheque or money order to:

Anne Griffiths

Understorey Network

PO BOX 126 Huonville TAS 7109

Name:

Address:

P/Code:

Phone Home:

Phone Work:

Fax:

Mobile:

Email:

Signed:

Date:



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If Undeliverable return to:

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PO BOX 9868

Hobart 7001