

# Paddock Plants field days – helping landholders to recognise and manage common pasture species.

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## Background

Grasslands and pastures are often composed of a wide variety of plants and, although there may only be 10 to 20 dominant species in a paddock, it is not unusual to find up to 100 different species (Lodge *et al.* 1990). Some of these have a role solely in agricultural production, while others may also have an important environmental value (biodiversity and habitat). In addition there are species that are considered detrimental to livestock production and/or the environment and are therefore regarded as weeds. Producer surveys have revealed a need for increased recognition skills of paddock plants, with landholders generally recognising only a small portion of common pasture species (Rose and Rose 2001). At a recent Northern Tablelands field day, where participants were asked to identify 16 common local pasture weeds ranging from broadleaf species to grasses, only one plant was recognised by all those who participated in the activity (Edwards 2005). Many landholders consider plant recognition skills as a high priority and a critical step in pasture management.

## The Paddock Plants concept

*Paddock Plants* is a new field day focusing on the recognition of common and local plant species within paddocks. This follows the premise that management and monitoring is impossible if the manager does not have the skills to evaluate what species are present to begin with, and how the composition may be changing over time.

Staff from the NSW Department of Primary Industries (NSW DPI) developed *Paddock Plants*, and piloted the field day across the state under the banner of NSW DPI. It builds upon the successful *Pasture (Grass) Recognition Workshops*, previously delivered to over 510 NSW participants (Edwards, Rose and McWhirter 2005).

## The Paddock Plants field day

The field day is 'hands on', with local pasture species on display and 'in situ' samples marked in the paddock for identification. Topics include recognition of structural features, understanding different growth cycles, attributes of the focus plants, biodiversity and how to make a herbarium. Simple monitoring techniques and pasture-livestock interactions are covered, along with some management principles.

Designed as a small field day, *Paddock Plants* is ideal when run with 15 to 20 participants, as this maximises the group learning experience. The majority of the time is spent in the paddock and attendees are encouraged to actively participate in several learning exercises. Follow-up days can be arranged to cover changes in plant composition due to seasonal variations or under different management or landscape influences.

Participants are provided with a ring-bound *Paddock Plants* folder that contains plant information sheets and other literature such as guidelines for making a herbarium. The plant information sheets are a single page describing the plant, its category, appearance, where it grows and why, appropriate management, similar plants and suggested further reading. Importantly, the sheets include photographs that help to recognise the plant. The folder and the plant information sheets are adapted and selected for each field day, thereby becoming relevant to the participants learning experience. They also become a valuable reference for participants after attending the course.

## Discussion

Pilot field days held in late 2005 in tablelands areas received positive feedback from participants. Sixty-seven percent said the field day was 'excellent', with the remainder describing the day as 'good'. Participants ranged from landholders, producers, and Catchment Management Authority staff to university students and TAFE staff. The evaluation indicated

that all respondents felt they had improved their plant recognition skills and had gained useful information. When asked, over 90% answered that they would come to a similar *Paddock Plants* day held in the same paddock at a different time or in a different paddock. The field day suits those landholders and land users who wish to increase their knowledge about common paddock plants in their area. It covers important recognition features and gives an understanding of why some plants grow where they grow. This also helps in understanding land capability and land management. For landholders to be able to better manage their paddock for both natural resource outcomes and productivity, the first step is being able to recognise plant species. This field day helps participants to make educated, rational decisions in their management plans. *Paddock Plants* is a statewide field day, delivered by NSW DPI district agronomists, designed to enable land managers to be better able to understand local paddock plants.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the rest of the *Paddock Plants* field day development team for their involvement in and support for the programme.

## References

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