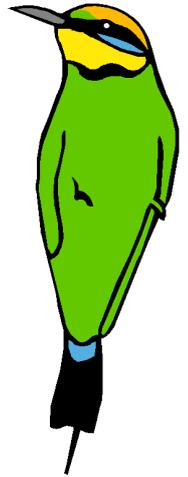


GARDEN FOR WILDLIFE

Couch...? One success story



Couch remains a persistent weed in gardens throughout Alice Springs (and beyond!). Spray it, pull it, mulch it, it still manages to poke it's little green head above the surface of the soil. I recently visited one Land for Wildlife property who had successfully eradicated what was once a solid back and front yard of couch lawn. Although their success was partly due to fortunate timing, a mix of diligence and experimentation has resulted in a beautiful couch-free garden.

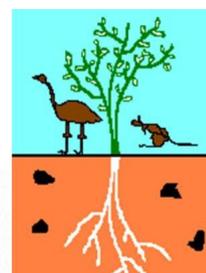
Couch, *Cynodon dactylon*, a native of Africa, is a popular lawn species, and is also considered one of the worst weeds in central Australia. It has completely smothered and replaced native plants in many of the natural drainage systems in our region, with devastating effects on species diversity and food availability for animals. Couch is a deep rooted grass to 30cm tall, forming dense mats and living for many years. The reproductive structures are arranged in spikes (4-7), which radiate from the top of the stems. It closely resembles the native species *Brachyachne convergens*, which has fewer spikes (2-4).



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Unfortunately, as I'm sure you've discovered, Couch is not an easy weed to control, as even a small piece of stem left behind can develop into a new plant. If you don't want to use chemicals, you can control small infestations by digging it out, with care. It is important to remove the underground stems by following them and gently digging them up, or they will regrow. Larger infestations can be controlled by smothering the area with something to block the light, including black plastic, old carpet, etc. for a minimum of 6 months.

If you are considering using chemical control, the time is when the plant is growing rapidly, and is green and healthy, preferably after rain. Given we may be waiting awhile for those rainclouds to deliver; another method is to give the grass a solid water to encourage new growth.

If using roundup, there needs to be enough leaf material above the ground to carry the poison through the plant to kill the roots, so don't mow or cut it before applying the poison. If you do mow to encourage new growth, wait till there is sufficient above ground leaf material before poisoning. Be aware it may take two to three applications to effectively control it. Alternatively, a week after you first spray it, you can cultivate the area to bring the rhizomes to the surface to dry out.

The Strangeways' moved into their Ilparpa block late 2001. They tried two different techniques on their front and back lawns, both with varying results but ultimately successful.

On the back lawn the Strangeways' sprayed once with glyphosate after rain. They placed down weed matting next day then covered it with mulch. They continued to spot spray and pull regrowth in the proceeding years. The weed mat was removed after two years when new growth had reduced to a manageable rate.

A different technique was tried on the front lawn. Two sprays were undertaken after rain. The entire area was then covered with a 5cm layer of sand and gravel mix. The sand was purchased from Centre Landscaping Supplies, and the gravel from a concrete supplier in town. Regrowth was very minimal, and when it did occur, was not connected to a rhizome.



Left: The Strangeways' Front Yard **Right:** The Strangeway's Back Yard

The Strangeways' attribute some of their victory to the 2002 rains, which provided sufficient water to encourage fresh, green new growth to enable spraying to be successful. However I myself am inspired by any story where a property owner has triumphed over couch, regardless of the circumstances! Good luck!

Albrecht, D. et al (1999) *Weeds of the Tanami*.

University of California, Integrated Pest Management.
www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7453.html

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News:

We're always on the lookout for articles to put in the Newsletter, so if you have a story you would be willing to share, give me a call and we can help you prepare it.

We have just received notice of the official launch of the Tasmanian Garden for Wildlife program even though it has been operating since March and has about the same number of members as we in Alice Springs have. They have an interesting website and you may find some useful ideas from it; www.gardensforwildlife.dpiw.tas.gov.au

Happy Gardening,
Danielle, GfW Coordinator