

# Native Lawns

It may surprise you to learn that not all native grasses are tall feature plants. In fact in parts of Australia, pasture is composed almost entirely of native grass species. For the home gardener, that means you can have a native lawn that you can mow.

There are many local indigenous grasses that make lovely tough lawns. Some are available as plugs or you can sow it from seed and both are available at selected nurseries. You will get a better result using material sourced from local populations, as these plants will be better suited to the climate in your area.

## How do native lawns benefit the environment?

Native grasses grow naturally under Australian climatic conditions. They have deep root systems, which means they require less watering than most conventional lawns and also enables them to survive periodic droughts and fires. They don't need to be fertilised as often as most lawns, because they have adapted to Australia's low fertility soil. Many native grasses have attractive flowers and seed heads, so interesting effects can be achieved by leaving carefully chosen areas of your lawn unmown. You can plant some indigenous wildflowers amongst the grass to create colourful areas of meadow. These are fantastic habitats for butterflies, pest-controlling insects and provide food for other wildlife such as birds.

## Varieties suitable for lawns

There are several types of perennial native grasses suitable for lawns. The following species can be found growing naturally in most parts of Australia. You will get the best result using seeds or plugs that have been sourced from local populations. These plants will be better suited to the climate in your area.

## Cool Season Grasses

These grasses do not go dormant over winter and, unless there is a prolonged period without rain, they remain green.

### Weeping grass (*Microlaena stipoides*)

Native to most of the wetter zones of Australia and New Zealand, this cool climate species is as tolerant of dry conditions as the most drought-tolerant warm-season grasses.

Type: Spreads short distances by rhizomes underground

Height: Can be mown to any height required

Features: Weeping Grass is perhaps the most suitable native grass for creating the look of a traditional lawn. It can be mown regularly and will grow well in a wide range of soils, including acidic soils with a pH less than 6.

Tolerances: High drought tolerance; High frost tolerance; Medium salt tolerance; Shade tolerant. Low tolerance to heavy traffic and dog urine.

## Wallaby grass (*Austrodanthonia* spp.)

Wallaby grass is widespread across the temperate areas of all Australian states.

Type: Tufted grass that should be mown no lower than 4cm.

Height: 30–80 cm

Features: Wallaby grass will survive without irrigation in soils from medium clays to light sandy loams with good drainage. It has white fluffy seed heads in spring and sometimes autumn.

Tolerances: High frost tolerance; High drought tolerance



Left: Kangaroo grass (*Themeda triandra*)

Right: Slender Wallaby grass (*Austrodanthonia penicillata*)

Photographs: Ken Harris, Churchill, Victoria. [Morwell National Park web site](#)

## Warm season grasses

These grasses actively grow during warm weather. In winter, they have a period of dormancy that is usually causes a change in leaf colour.

### Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra* syn. *T.australis*)

Kangaroo grass is one of the most widespread native grasses in Australia growing in every state and territory. It grows from interior arid regions, to the Alps and the coast.

Type: Tufting. Will tolerate mowing twice a year.

Height: 40-90cm

Features: As the foliage ages it changes colour from green to maroon. In summer the plant bears attractive rusty-red seed heads.

Tolerances: High drought and heat tolerance; Low to moderate frost tolerance.

## **Redgrass (*Bothriochloa macra*)**

Redgrass occurs mainly in coastal, tablelands and slopes environments.

Type: Running, spreading slowly on underground stems

Height: 10cm

Features: Redgrass, as the name suggests, has green or reddish leaves. In summer and early autumn it produces reddish-purple flowering stems, which grow up to 80 cm. Its naturally low height means it may never need mowing!

Tolerances: High drought and heat tolerance; Low to moderate frost tolerance

## **How do I grow a native lawn?**

Native lawns can be grown from seed and some are available as trays of plugs; both available in nurseries, or the seeds can be ordered online from [www.nativeseeds.com.au](http://www.nativeseeds.com.au).

While germinating, the seed should not be allowed to dry out and the lawn will require some additional watering to establish over the first few months. After the seed has germinated and put on some growth, help the grass to establish deep root systems by gradually watering for longer periods on fewer days. Eventually your lawn will survive with no additional water, simply rainfall. During droughts, the grasses may brown off, but if their root systems have been well established, they will resprout with the first good rain.

Native lawns require little, if any fertiliser. If you are mowing regularly, simply returning the clippings to the lawn may be enough. Native lawn species can thrive on low fertility soils, where weeds are at a disadvantage. If you avoid fertilising your lawn until you are sure that it needs it, you can reduce the number of weeds you get in your lawn too.