Agnote

No: E40

April 2007

Pasture Grasses of the Barkly Tableland

Part 2. Golden Beard Grass (Ribbon Grass)

(Chrysopogon fallax)

S. Streeter, Pastoral Production, Tennant Creek

DISTRIBUTION

Golden beard grass (*Chrysopogon fallax*) is found in a variety of soil types, usually in locations favourable to moisture accumulation. It is often associated with Mitchell grasses (*Astrebla* spp.) in lower lying parts of the black soil plains as well as in depressions in red soil country and along creek lines. The species is moderately palatable to cattle and is highly resistant to grazing and drought.

DESCRIPTION

Golden beard grass is a deep rooted, tussocky perennial grass with a fairly low crown of long narrow leaves extending from the base of the plant. The butt of the grass is characteristically fibrous and is often very difficult to pull out.

The leaves are usually 20-40 cm long and about 5 mm wide. They may be semi-erect when green but tend to spread along the ground as they dry off, becoming straw coloured and folded.

The seed head is open with spikelets on long weeping branchlets, and is borne on an erect stalk that projects well above the leafy base. Seed heads may be up to 20 cm long and 10 cm wide, with the branchlets and spikelets well spaced, giving the head an open appearance. Spikelets are 9-11 mm long and may be purplish to golden-brown in colour, with brown awns up to 30 mm long. The stalk on which the seed head is borne may be up to 1.5 m tall.

NUTRITIONAL VALUE

Golden beard grass is moderately to highly palatable, especially when young and green. It responds quickly to the first rains of the wet season, but tends to dry out sooner than other associated perennials when rains cease. Although it provides good quality forage when it is green, the proportion of golden beard grass in the pasture is usually small compared with the other perennials such as Mitchell grasses. If the other species commence growing at the same time as golden beard grass, they will constitute a much larger portion of cattle diets.

Digestibility of golden beard grass is comparable to that of hoop and barley Mitchell grasses in the wet growing season, but deteriorates to below that of Mitchell grass late in the dry season.

A seed head of golden beard grass

The leaves of golden beard grass curve over when dry and have a ribbon-like appearance

Crude protein of golden beard grass is comparable to that of barley Mitchell grass in the wet growing season, but will decline to very low levels when the grass dries off. Phosphorus content of golden beard grass shows a similar pattern over the season, declining considerably by the late dry season compared with both Mitchell and Flinders grasses.

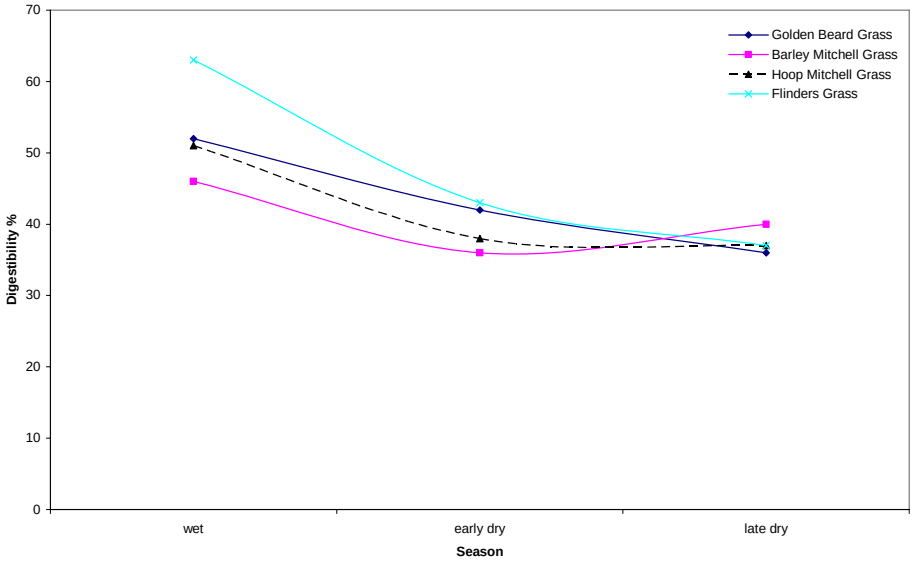

Figure 1. Seasonal trend in dry matter digestibility of four Barkly Tableland pasture grasses

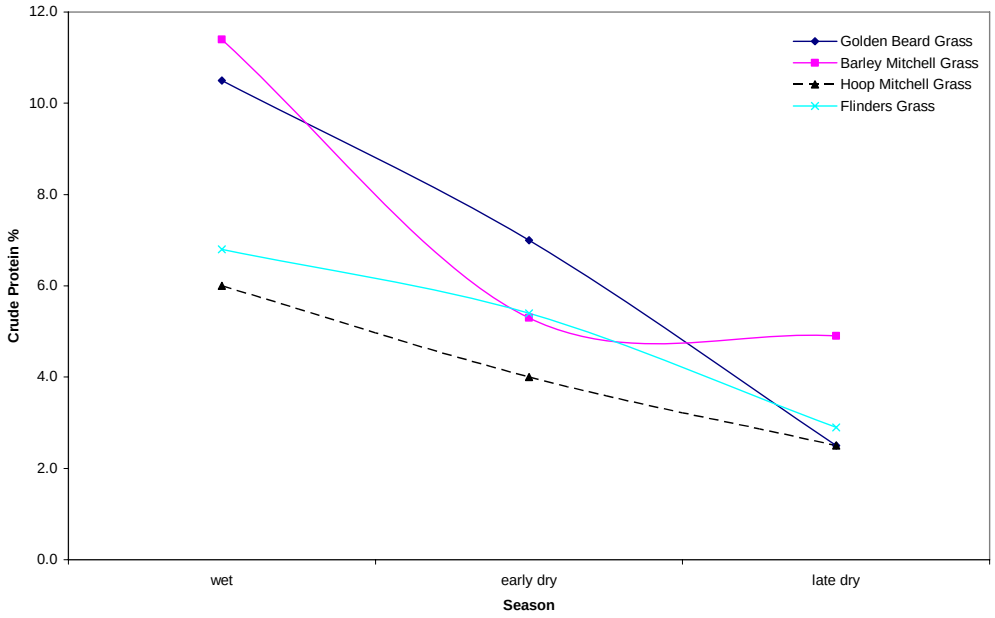

Figure 2. Seasonal trend in crude protein content of four Barkly Tableland pasture grasses

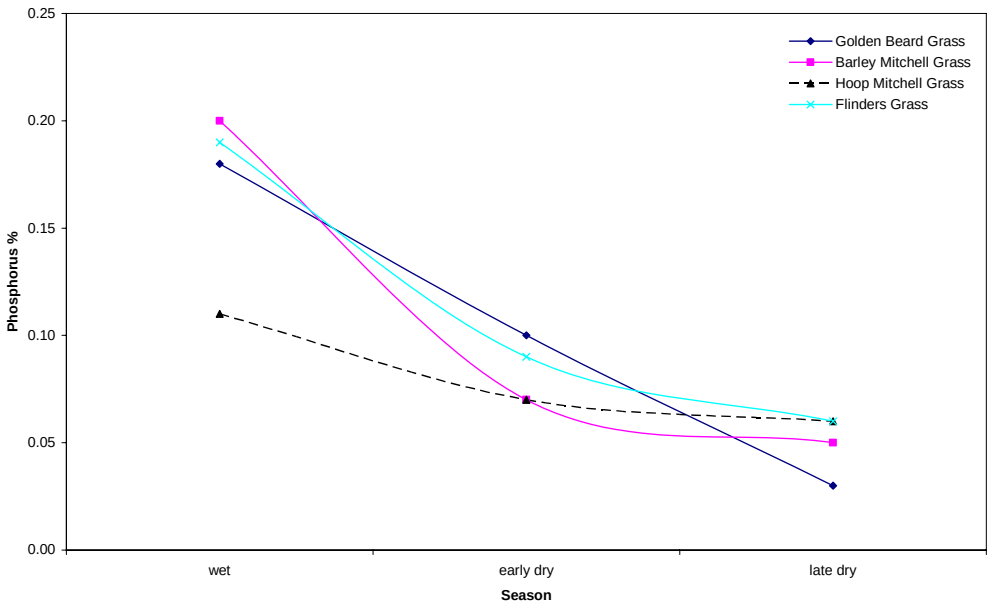

Figure 3. Seasonal trend in phosphorus content of four Barkly Tableland pasture grasses

MANAGEMENT

Golden beard grass is very resistant to grazing and drought due to its vigorous, deep root system. Its rapid response to early rain makes it a valuable component of pasture as it often provides good feed before associated perennials are ready. On the other hand, in lighter red soils, it may be neglected in favour of the sweeter annuals that respond similarly to early summer rains. Despite its rapid response to early summer rainfall, golden beard grass is usually relatively sparse in Mitchell grass pastures. It will therefore not provide useful feed for long under heavy grazing.

FURTHER READING

Holm, A. McR. and Eliot, G.J. (1980). Seasonal changes in the nutritive value of some native pasture species in north Western Australia. *Australian Rangeland Journal* 2(2); 175-82.

Lazarides, M. (1970). The Grasses of Central Australia. ANU Press, Canberra.

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