



Department of
Primary Industries and
Regional Development

Journal of the Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, Series 3

Volume 3
Number 6 *November-December, 1954*

Article 26

11-1954

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Recommended Citation

Nunn, W M. and Suijdendorp, H (1954) "Kapok bush (*aerua tomentosa*)," *Journal of the Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, Series 3*: Vol. 3: No. 6, Article 26.

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KAPOK BUSH

(*Aerua tomentosa*)

A Very Useful Perennial for North-West Pastoral Areas

By W. M. NUNN, Officer-in-Charge, North-West Branch, and
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IN our drier North-West pastoral areas rains are normally confined to the summer months. Dependent upon cyclonic influences, they are very uncertain, and a region said to enjoy an average of 10in. rain per year, might have as little as 1in. or as much as 30in. in any one season. Whether the recordings are high or low they are nearly always confined to those few summer months, and a long dry period generally extends without break from May to December.

The latter part of this dry season is necessarily an unhappy time from the animal nutrition point of view.

Grasses have matured and dried off. A good deal of the leaf and seed has been eaten or blown away, and the crude protein content of remaining edible material is usually well below 5%. *Spinifex* remains intact and green somewhat longer, but an

satisfactory milk production it is not in the least surprising that ewe and lamb mortality is high.

In the ruminant, bacterial activity within the rumen or first stomach, is an important factor in digestion. Recent investigations have shown that a minimum of 8% crude protein is necessary in the diet of the sheep to enable these organisms to do their work properly. Unless this percentage is available the animal does not obtain full benefit from the forage consumed.

Where the protein content is as low as 5% or 6% therefore, even a dry sheep suffers a degree of malnutrition though the dry feed available may be plentiful.

Into this grim picture comes a very useful plant commonly called Kapok bush or pillow bush. Tiny black seed are embedded in fluffy white balls which en masse resemble the kapok of commerce.

For many years these plants have been growing near homesteads and camp sites in the Port Hedland area, but their importance was not recognised until comparatively recently.

It is thought by many that the seed may have been introduced, along with Buffel grass, in saddle-packing or fodder for camels in the early days when camel teams played a part in our North-West transport system.

Others have suggested that the crews of pearling luggers may have brought the seed

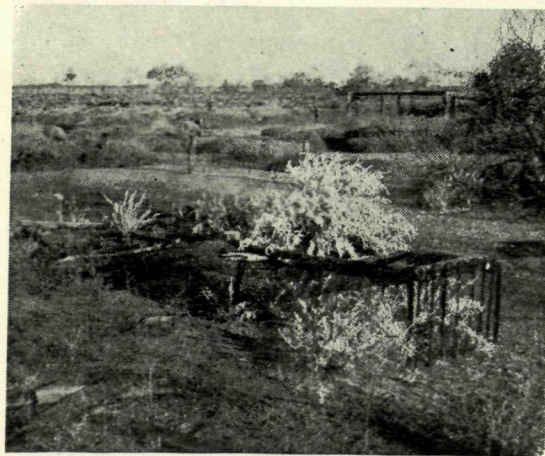


Fig. 1.—Kapok bush spreading from a concentration under a derelict bedstead in an old native camp on Abydos Station

average stand at this time of the year would obtain no more than 6% of protein.

On many stations, ewes are expected to rear lambs under these conditions, and as a ewe needs a protein content of 16% for

in mattresses and pillows from the islands north of Australia. Either or both explanations seem feasible as the plant is indigenous to India and Afghanistan which supplied camel fodders, and also to Burma, Ceylon, Java, Sumatra and the many other islands north of Australia which would have been ports of call for pearling vessels.



Fig. 2.—Kapok bush growing in a crack in a granite rock. This bush had recently been eaten down by cattle which left only one flowering stalk

Wherever it came from in the first instance, its use as a filling material for bedding has certainly aided its spread here in our country. It is frequently to be found where natives have had their encampments. The concentration under the old bedstead in the photograph certainly suggests that a native brought it to this particular site.

Station-owners and managers in the Port Hedland area now value the plant highly, and are actively assisting its spread. Already there are large acreages of it along the DeGrey, Coongan, Yule and Turner Rivers, and it seems adaptable to a wide variety of soils, from red sand dunes to comparatively heavy loams.

The plant is a perennial and develops a taproot which penetrates many feet into the soil. This may account for the fact that kapok bush stays green and continues to make growth long after grasses have dried off.

The young plants have abundant foliage, but it gets rather sparse when the plant matures and flowers. However this foliage

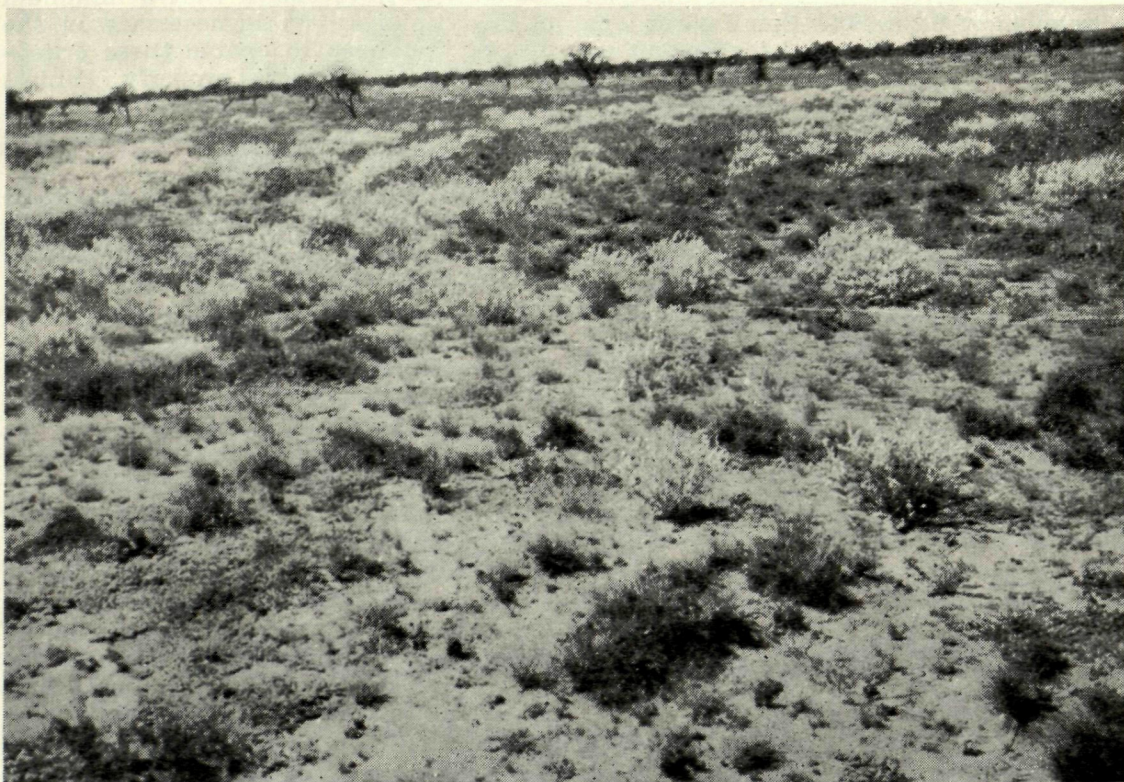


Fig. 3.—Kapok bush, buffel grass and spinifex make a good mixed diet on De Grey Station

is highly nutritious as its crude protein content is as high as 26%. In areas where the country carries good nutritious forage for a considerable portion of the year, the animals do not seem to favour it particularly until other vegetation has dried off. Even as late as October-November, the plant is still green, and analysis shows about 21% crude protein. Thus it admirably balances the diet during this lean period, and assists the animals to utilise the dry foliage more efficiently. Sheep seem to be in the habit of stripping leaves off the stalk and do not seem to touch the seed. Cattle often consume the entire plant.

Where the quality of forage is low all through the year, as in pure stands of spinifex, stock will eat kapok bush at any stage of growth, and it may be necessary to protect the plant when trying to establish them in these areas.

The seed is extremely hard and often difficult to germinate. A method which has given considerable success in spinifex country is to combine planting with the spinifex burn, so that heat from the fire is used as an aid to germination. Seed is scattered among the spinifex during winter months. Dust and sand provide cover for the seed, and the spinifex is burned shortly before the summer rains are due.

Burns of this nature are necessary of course to dispose of overgrown and useless

spinifex. They are best delayed until just before summer rains so that the country is not left bare and exposed to wind erosion for long periods. Combined in this way with the spread of kapok seed it has been very successful, in a number of instances, in establishing a quick stand of kapok bush.

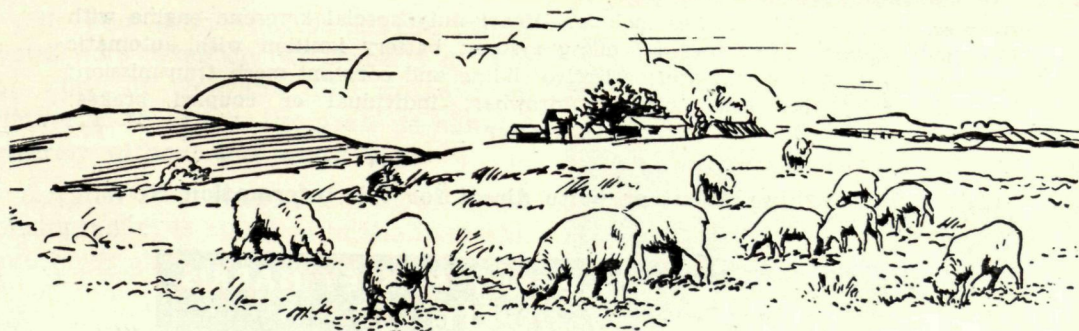
Kapok bush has recently shown up on a number of Kimberley stations where it has in all probability been introduced along with buffel seed from the Port Hedland area.

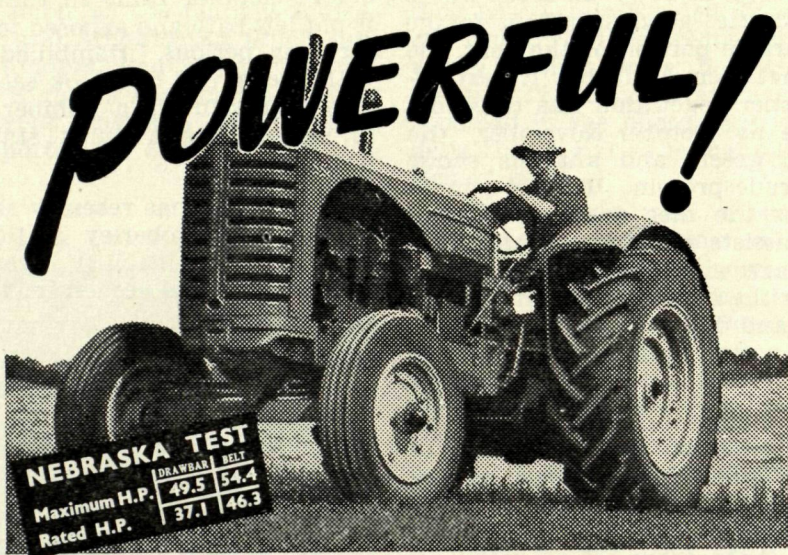
It has enjoyed a mixed reception in the Kimberleys so far, because its value has been unknown, and as cattle don't rush it in the early stages many have looked on it as a possibly undesirable weed.

Cattle may not take to it readily in good Kimberley seasons, when other attractive fodder plants are available, but we do know that cattle enjoy it in the spinifex areas, and there seems every reason to believe that it would greatly improve the grazing on Kimberley pindan soils if it can be established there.

Mr. G. C. Rose, at Mt. Anderson, has already taken active steps along these lines.

Using a Ferguson tractor he has run plough furrows through some of his country, and has broadcast kapok and buffel seed along the furrows.





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