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RAMBLING AROUND THE FARM – WEED HAZARDS

By Andy Cowan

I will be forever grateful for the help we received after the bushfires last year. Although it seems like a long time ago, and yes I am still trying to complete the fencing, a reminder of this generosity materialized last month.

I happened to be checking the stags, hinds and calves in their mating mobs and noticed that three of the calves, now aged 4 months, had diarrhoea. I do not get too concerned if one calf has a problem. I simply keep a close watch on it. If three out of a mob of twenty five are scouring, it is something to be a bit more concerned about. While driving around the paddock I came across a circle of paddy melons, camel melons and horehound. I have never had any of these on my property before. I was to discover that there were six similar areas. Some of the round bales that were donated to me last autumn must have contained either the fruit or the seeds of these melons. By the time I noticed what was going on, all the leaves of the vines were eaten and the fruit was left exposed on the surface in all but two cases. In these latter two cases, the melons were basically hidden by the clover/rye pasture.

Needless to say, I was quite surprised to learn that both the melons are quite a common problem in the southern areas of Australia. Their behaviour seems to be similar to other melons we would normally grow for food ... not surprisingly, given they are from the same family as cucumbers, squashes, pumpkins, melons and watermelons – Cucurbitaceae. The prickly paddy melon fruit are two to three centimetres in diameter and are covered in long soft bristles and have longitudinal dark green and yellow stripes. The camel melon fruit are large and smooth skinned, up to 15 centimetres in diameter. They are mostly a darker green with some yellow variegation. Like watermelons, they grow in spring to early summer and can continue growing well into autumn if the weather is warm enough. The top growth and foliage will die in cold weather.

Generally the melons are found in irrigation channels and other areas that retain soil moisture. As you may expect they will, more than likely, be found in areas that have good spring and/or summer rainfall, in over-grazed areas (similar to capeweed) and sandier soils which will allow better tap-root growth. The seeds are readily spread via irrigation water and can remain dormant for several years. So I am concerned that I will be having similar problems with melons for the next few years.

I spoke to the Shire Weed Officer about their disposal as I was concerned that they would take over the farm. Understandably, they did not want them to go to the green waste section of the shire tip. They suggested



Camel melon in the middle of many prickly paddy melons



Camel melons

that I bury them in a hole about 2m deep and if possible, burn them. I have collected most of the melons from the paddock and fortunately a friend has such a pit on his farm. As the seeds may last up to three years in the ground, I have a feeling that I will see more of these plants in the future.

According to "Herbiguide", horses, sheep and cattle losses have been associated with eating the melons. Generally, stock will only eat the melons if there is nothing much else to eat as the smell is a deterrent to them. It seems that generally they will cause diarrhoea, amongst other ailments, depending on the animal concerned. I have since moved the deer into another paddock and the problem seems to have been solved – all the calves are OK again.



Horehound, Paddy melons and Camel melon

References

1. Farmnote No. 91/93 [Replaces 22/88] [Reviewed July 2005] *Paddy and Afghan melons*. By John Borger, Regional Officer, and Rick Madin, formerly Research Officer, Weed Science, South Perth.
2. www.herbiguide.com.au