

## Colonising natives – Reeds and Bulrush

People often think that if a plant is growing vigorously it must be a weed. But several native plants, frequently treated as weeds, could do with a bit more understanding. Principal among these are Reeds and Bulrushes that grow in wet places. They are cosmopolitan plants – these, or closely related species, are native to many places across the world.

Reeds (*Phragmites australis*) and Bulrushes (*Typha domingensis*) are common components of wetlands in South Australia. They are vigorous and grow to 3m in height. Reeds or Bulrush provide important habitat for wildlife, protect watercourses from erosion and remove sediment and nutrients from water. Vast stands of these species once occurred to the west of Adelaide where the River Torrens once spread out into a large wetland known to early settlers as the “Reedbeds”. Their size and their ability to cover large areas causes concern for land managers and these species have developed a reputation for being weeds.

Reeds and Bulrushes have little tolerance for drought so they grow only where the soil is inundated or permanently damp. In the hills, you find them in natural wetlands, around spring-fed dams and in any low-lying areas that are permanently wet. Dams in which the water level varies by more than 2 meters will generally not grow Reeds and Bulrushes.

Bulrushes have masses of long strappy leaves arising low on the plant with a tall cylindrical seed-head. Reeds are a kind of large growing aquatic grass. They have somewhat more tolerance to salinity and drought than Bulrushes. Don't confuse native Reeds with the introduced Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*) which is also commonly called “bamboo” and is definitely a pest. Reeds flower at about 2m or at most 3m in height whereas Giant Reed has stouter stems which grow up to 5 or 6m high.

Patches of Reeds and Bulrushes are great habitat for wildlife. Look out for reed-warblers, rails, crakes and native hens. Native water rats (*Hydromys chrysogaster*) also live in and around them.

So, Reeds and Bulrushes are a real environmental positive. But there are situations where they may need to be managed. These usually relate to the need to access a water body for pumping or for boating, or the need to remove built-up sediment. Some people want to clear them for aesthetic reasons such as creating views.

Regulations under the Native Vegetation Act provide for the management of Reeds and Bulrushes where the clearance is of regrowth or colonising growth and the area is less than 100 square metres. Reeds and Bulrushes are cleared from sedimentation basins with a backhoe but small-scale clearance can be done by cutting below water level or by carefully wiping the leaves with glyphosate.

Rather than clearance, managing by slashing should be considered. By cutting a proportion of the patch each year, the patch will produce fresh regrowth. Over several years, the patch will be kept looking fresh and the build-up of dead plant material will be minimised. This form of management often satisfies people who have an aesthetic objection to Reeds and Bulrushes. A brush-cutter with a Wakka® blade attachment can be used to cut Reeds and Bulrushes.

If you need to clear or manage Reeds and Bulrushes, always be mindful of their habitat value. A good rule of thumb is to do no more than one third of the area in any one year. Autumn is a better time to do it than spring or summer because wildlife is less affected and water levels are usually lower.

### **Summing up**

Some indigenous species can vigorously colonise watercourses and wetlands. Although some clearance of regrowth is allowed in the regulations of the Native Vegetation Act, these species should not be considered to be weeds. Their habitat and other values should be assessed prior to management or control.

**Andrew Crompton – City of Burnside, Conservation and Land Management**





*Typha* at First Creek – Waterfall Gully





*Phragmites* at First Creek – Waterfall Gully