



Government  
of South Australia

# WEED IDENTIFICATION NOTES

ANIMAL AND PLANT CONTROL COMMISSION

## INNOCENT WEED



*Burrs of Cenchrus longispinus*



*Plant of Cenchrus longispinus*

# INNOCENT WEED



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*Cenchrus incertus* and *Cenchrus longispinus* are both called innocent weed and were introduced from north and central America. The two species are very similar, the minor differences include greater number and length of spines on the fruit of *C. longispinus*, which is always annual while *C. incertus* can be perennial. In South Australia, almost all innocent weed infestations are *C. longispinus*, but *C. incertus* is more common in the eastern States.

## Distribution

Eyre Peninsula	- isolated infestations but high potential for spread
Northern pastoral	- common in Pt Augusta, isolated infestations in the southern rangelands, isolated patches in northern pastoral
Northern ag districts / Yorke Peninsula	- widespread
Murray Mallee	- widespread
South East	- scattered in north, scarce in south
Central region	- small isolated infestations

## Impacts

The burrs of innocent weed contaminate wool, adding to costs of handling and processing and downgrading the product. Their needle-sharp spines also cause physical damage to livestock and people. The burrs can also contaminate crops and produce, especially dried fruit, reducing its value and marketability.

## Recognition

*Cenchrus longispinus* is a summer-growing annual grass, and difficult to distinguish from other grasses until the burrs are formed. Leaves are flat, light green and 3-8 mm wide. The bases of the stems have a reddish colour and are bent, giving the plant a spreading shape.

The flowering head at the end of an erect stem up to 80 cm tall produces up to 40 burrs. Burrs are 4-7mm wide, finely hairy, green to straw-coloured or purplish and contain 1-4 smooth ovoid seeds. They bear 40 or more sharp spines 3-7 mm long with microscopic barbs. Roots are fibrous and shallow.

*Cenchrus incertus* is similar, but sometimes becomes perennial (re-shooting from the crown in spring) and has swollen, hollow leaf sheaths. The burrs are often hairless, and have fewer spines up to 5 mm long.

## Ecology

Innocent weed grows well on disturbed sandy ground and under irrigation and will not establish well in managed pastures.

Seeds germinate mainly in spring and early summer after rain but germination can also occur at other times of the year. Burrs are produced over summer and most plants die in autumn. Summer rainfall and irrigation will extend the growing season.

The hooked spines on the burrs are well adapted for dispersal on animals by clinging to wool and fur. The burrs are easily carried on clothing, packaging and vehicle tyres. Contaminated hay and produce is a common method of spread for innocent weed.

Further Information:

Parsons, W.T. & Cuthbertson, E.G. (2000). *Noxious Weeds of Australia*. 2nd ed. Inkata Press.

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**For more advice on recognising and controlling innocent weed, contact your local Animal and Plant Control Board:**



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