



photo: S. McIntyre

florabank

Wurmbea dioica

Wurmbea dioica is a bulbous, herbaceous plant, 15 to 20 cm tall with 2-3 linear leaves up the stem [9]. It is one of the first herbs to flower from winter to early spring, hence the common name of Early Nancy [2, 3, 7].

Population map:

www.ala.org.au/explore/species-maps/

Natural Populations

Wurmbea dioica is found in Qld, NSW, Vic, Tas and SA [6]. It grows on a wide range of soil types and vegetation communities, usually in open sunny positions in moist well-drained soil in open grasslands or in grassy clearings in woodlands [2]. In the right conditions, after reasonable autumn rains, *W. dioica* can appear in large numbers.



photo: L. Oliver - www.flicker.com

Flowering and Seeds

The flowers are white with a purple band, and honey-scented [10], appearing from July to October for about three weeks [1, 2, 10]. There is a form with greenish-yellow flowers that is found in far western NSW and SA [9].

Plants may carry both male and female flowers and bisexual flowers. Other plants may have only male or female flowers [9].

The seed capsules have 3 cells [2]. Seeds turn from cream to red-brown when ripe and shed within 3-14 days [2, 4]. Collect seeds from November to December [1, 2]. Harvest stalks with the capsules by hand and place upside down in paper bag. Dry until capsules open, then lightly thresh to extract seed, and sieve [4].

Cultivation and Uses

Fresh seed sown in autumn usually germinates in 3-5 weeks [1, 2, 5]. Plants may take 3 years to flower when grown from seed [1, 2]. Above-ground growth dies off rapidly after seeding [3, 10]. *W. dioica* also transplants readily [9, 13].

W. dioica prefers full sun or part shade, grows in most soils and is frost hardy [13]. Ample water should be applied in spring and summer. The species could also be grown in containers [9], but it may be difficult to grow outside preferred conditions [1].

The small, starchy underground corm was eaten by indigenous people [8, 10].

The leaves are quite palatable to stock, but the plant rarely occurs in sufficient numbers to contribute greatly to the spring forage [3].

To source seeds or plants:
www.grassywoodlands.org.au

photo: L. Oliver - www.flickr.com



Female flowers

photo: J. Lindner



Male flowers

References

- [1] Stelling, F. (ed.) (1998). *South West Slopes Revegetation Guide*. Murray Catchment Management Committee, Albury, NSW.
- [2] Walker, K., Burrows, G. and McMahon, L. (2001). *Bidgee Bush, An identification guide to common native plants species of the South Western Slopes of New South Wales*. Greening Australia, South West Slopes.
- [3] Cunningham, G.M., Mulham, W.E., Milthorpe, P.L. and Leigh, J.H. (1981). *Plants of Western New South Wales*. D. West: NSW Government Printing Office.
- [4] Ralph, M. (1993). *Seed Collection of Australian Native Plants For Revegetation, Tree Planting and Direct Seeding*. 2nd ed. Fitzroy, Victoria: Bushland Horticulture.
- [5] Ralph, M. (1997). *Growing Australian Native Plants from Seed For Revegetation, Tree Planting and Direct Seeding*. Fitzroy, Victoria: Murray Ralph/Bushland Horticulture.
- [11] Vaughton, G. and Ramsey, M. (2003). Self-compatibility and floral biology in subdioecious *Wurmbea dioica* (Colchicaceae). *Australian Journal of Botany* 51(1), pp. 39 – 45. Online: <http://www.publish.csiro.au/paper/BT02054.htm>
- [12] Jones, A. and Burd, M. (2003). Vegetative and reproductive variation among unisexual and hermaphroditic individuals of *Wurmbea dioica* (Colchicaceae). *Australian Journal of Botany* 49(5), pp. 603 – 609. Online: <http://www.publish.csiro.au/paper/BT01008.htm>

Internet links

- [6] PlantNET National Herbarium of New South Wales: <http://plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/NSWfl.pl?page=nswfl&lvl=s&p&name=Wurmbea-dioica>
- [7] La Trobe University: http://www.latrobe.edu.au/boxironbark/pollen/species/wurmbea_dioica.htm
- [8] La Trobe University: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/wildlife/assets/downloads/Aboriginal-plant-use-list.pdf>
- [9] A View from Yallaroo, website: http://www.yallaroo.com.au/Wurmbea_dioica.htm
- [10] Yarra Ranges Local Plant Directory: http://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/Residents/Yarra_Ranges_Plant_Directory/Lower_Storey/Lilies_and_Iris/Wurmbea_dioica_ssp__dioica
- [13] Australian National Botanic Gardens & Australian National Herbarium, Harden Species List: <http://www.anbg.gov.au/greening-grainbelt/harden-species-list.xls>