

WATER USE OF PERENNIAL SUMMER GRASSES IN SOUTH AFRICA

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
UITTREKSEL	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	x
CHAPTER 1	
GENERAL INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 References	3
CHAPTER 2	
WATER USE OF FIVE PERENNIAL SUB-TROPICAL GRASSES AT FOUR	
LEVELS OF WATER AVAILABILITY	6
Abstract	6
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 Materials and Methods	9
2.3 Results	13
<i>2.3.1 Water use</i>	13
<i>2.3.2 Soil profile water loss</i>	24
<i>2.3.3 Root study</i>	31
2.4 Discussion and Conclusions	34

2.5 References	35
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CHAPTER 3

DRY MATTER YIELDS OF FIVE SUB-TROPICAL PERENNIAL GRASS SPECIES AT FOUR LEVELS OF WATER AVAILABILITY	38
Abstract	38
3.1 Introduction	40
3.2 Materials and Methods	41
3.3 Results	44
<i>3.3.1 Dry matter yield</i>	44
<i>3.3.2 Contribution of the yield components to the above-ground dry matter yield</i>	53
3.4 Discussion and Conclusions	57
3.5 References	59

CHAPTER 4

NUTRITIVE VALUE OF FIVE PERENNIAL SUB-TROPICAL GRASSES UNDER DIFFERENT LEVELS OF WATER AVAILABILITY	64
Abstract	64
4.1 Introduction	66
4.2 Materials and Methods	67
4.3 Results	71
<i>4.3.1 In vitro dry matter digestibility</i>	71
<i>4.3.2 Crude protein content</i>	77
4.4 Discussion and Conclusions	80

4.5 References	82
-----------------------	-----------

CHAPTER 5

WATER USE EFFICIENCY OF FIVE PERENNIAL SUB-TROPICAL GRASS

SPECIES AT FOUR LEVELS OF WATER AVAILABILITY	87
---	-----------

Abstract	87
-----------------	-----------

5.1 Introduction	88
-------------------------	-----------

5.2 Materials and Methods	89
----------------------------------	-----------

5.3 Results	94
--------------------	-----------

<i>5.3.1 Water use efficiency in terms of dry matter yield (WUE_{DM})</i>	94
--	-----------

<i>5.3.2 Water use efficiency in terms of digestible dry matter yield (WUE_{DDM})</i>	97
--	-----------

<i>5.3.3 Water use efficiency in terms of crude protein yield (WUE_{CP})</i>	101
---	------------

5.4 Discussion and Conclusions	103
---------------------------------------	------------

5.5 References	105
-----------------------	------------

CHAPTER 6

THE GROWTH AND PRODUCTIVITY OF FIVE PERENNIAL SUB-TROPICAL

GRASS SPECIES UNDER IRRIGATION IN PRETORIA, SOUTH AFRICA.	110
--	------------

Abstract	110
-----------------	------------

6.1 Introduction	112
-------------------------	------------

6.2 Materials and Methods	112
----------------------------------	------------

6.3 Results	115
--------------------	------------

<i>6.3.1 Growth rate and cumulative dry matter production</i>	115
---	------------

<i>6.3.2 Cumulative leaf area</i>	118
-----------------------------------	------------

<i>6.3.3 Partitioning of assimilates to leaf, stem and inflorescence</i>	119
--	------------

6.4 Discussion and Conclusions	119
6.5 References	121

CHAPTER 7

MORPHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LEAVES OF FIVE SUB-TROPICAL

PERENNIAL GRASS SPECIES **123**

Abstract **123**

7.1 Introduction **124**

7.2 Materials and Methods **125**

7.3 Results **129**

7.3.1 Terminology **129**

7.3.2 Cenchrus ciliaris **134**

7.3.3 Cynodon hybrid **140**

7.3.4 Digitaria eriantha subsp. eriantha **146**

7.3.5 Panicum maximum **151**

7.3.6 Pennisetum clandestinum **156**

7.3.7 Number of stomata **161**

7.4 Discussion and Conclusions **164**

7.5 References **166**

CHAPTER 8

THE EFFECT OF WATER AND NITROGEN AVAILABILITY ON THE YIELD AND

WATER USE EFFICIENCY OF THREE SUB-TROPICAL PERENNIAL GRASS

SPECIES **170**

Abstract **170**

8.1	Introduction	171
8.2	Materials and Methods	172
8.3	Results	175
	8.3.1 <i>Water use</i>	175
	8.3.2 <i>Dry matter yield</i>	177
	8.3.3 <i>Water use efficiency (WUE)</i>	181
	8.3.4 <i>Above and below ground production</i>	184
8.4	Discussion and Conclusions	189
8.5	References	190
	CHAPTER 9	
	SUMMARY	193
	APPENDIX	202

WATER USE OF PERENNIAL SUMMER GRASSES IN SOUTH AFRICA

by

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ABSTRACT

Five subtropical perennial grass species, *Cenchrus ciliaris*, a *Cynodon* hybrid, *Digitaria eriantha* subsp. *eriantha*, *Panicum maximum* and *Pennisetum clandestinum*, were subjected to four levels of water availability in a small plot trial under a rainshelter during the summer growing seasons of 1996/97 and 1997/98. This work was carried out on the Hatfield Experimental Farm of the University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

The average yields for the tufted species (*C. ciliaris*, *D. eriantha* and *P. maximum*) were lower in the 1997/98 than the 1996/97 season. *C. ciliaris*, however, produced the highest average yields in both seasons. The average yields of the *Cynodon* hybrid and *P. clandestinum* (creeping grasses) reacted differently, in that the average yields were higher in the 1997/98 than 1996/97 season.

The dry matter yields of all five grass species at slight water deficits, were not significantly different from yields under conditions of no water shortages, when the soil profile was brought to field capacity at the beginning of the growing season. The implication hereof is, that dry matter yields can be maintained, in conditions where slight water deficits occur, if there is some water stored in the soil profile.

C. ciliaris, a notable drought tolerant species, produced yields (11.7-20.0 t ha⁻¹) under non-control conditions (W1, W2 and W3) which were comparable to yields obtained from traditionally irrigated grasses such as the *Cynodon* hybrid (12.0-15.8 t ha⁻¹) and *P. clandestinum* (5.6-11.8 t ha⁻¹), under control conditions (W4). *P. clandestinum*, *D. eriantha* and *P. maximum* tended to be better adapted to wetter conditions, while the *Cynodon* hybrid was also able to produce good yields under both water limiting and non-limiting conditions.

Water use efficiency, regardless of the grass species, tended to be better under non-control conditions. Grasses were thus able to produce more dry matter per unit of water under conditions where water became scarce.

In vitro dry matter digestibility was not negatively affected by water scarcity, while crude protein content more often than not seemed to be better under control conditions. This could be due to the uptake mechanism of nutrients, in which water plays a vital role.

The number of stoma per unit area was more under control than water limiting conditions. The expression of the different structures on the leaf surfaces, were not

altered by the level of water availability.

In the absence of water shortages, the growth rates of *C. ciliaris*, *D. eriantha* and *P. maximum*, were almost twice those of the *Cynodon* hybrid and *P. clandestinum*, as measured at the end of two growth cycles in an irrigated field trial.

In a pot trial, under glasshouse conditions, with *C. ciliaris*, the *Cynodon* hybrid and *P. clandestinum*, both the level of water availability, and the level of nitrogen were varied. Regardless of species and level of nitrogen, water was still used more efficiently under non-control conditions. Higher levels of nitrogen did, however, improve water use efficiency regardless of level of water available. As with higher levels of available water, higher levels of nitrogen also improved yields. In this trial, the *Cynodon* hybrid and *C. ciliaris* also out-yielded *P. clandestinum*.

In summary it can be said that *C. ciliaris* and the *Cynodon* hybrid are adapted to warm growing conditions in producing high yields regardless of the level of water available. *D. eriantha*, *P. maximum* and *P. clandestinum* would produce better in such growing conditions if water was not as limiting. Regardless of the species, the plants were able to use water more efficiently under non-control conditions, while *in vitro* digestibility was not negatively affected by water limiting conditions. Due to the uptake mechanism of nutrients, water limiting conditions may, however, decrease the crude protein content of the grass plants. Higher levels of nitrogen had a positive impact on dry matter yields and water use efficiency.

WATER GEBRUIK VAN MEERJARIGE SOMER-GRASSE IN SUID-AFRIKA

deur

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GRAAD: PhD - Weidingkunde

UITTREKSEL

Vyf subtropiese meerjarige grasspesies, *Cenchrus ciliaris*, 'n *Cynodon baster*, *Digitaria eriantha* subsp. *eriantha*, *Panicum maximum* en *Pennisetum clandestinum*, is aan vier vlakke van waterbeskikbaarheid, in 'n klein perseel proef, onder 'n reënskerm, gedurende die 1996/97 en 1997/98 somer groeiseisoene blootgestel. Hierdie werk is uitgevoer op die Hatfield Proefplaas van die Universiteit van Pretoria, Pretoria, Suid-Afrika.

The gemiddelde opbrengste van die polgrasse (*C. ciliaris*, *D. eriantha* en *P. maximum*) was laer in die 1997/98 as in 1996/97 seisoen. *C. ciliaris* het egter die hoogste gemiddelde opbrengs in beide seisoene gelewer. Die gemiddelde opbrengste van die *Cynodon baster* en *P. clandestinum* (kruipende-grasse) het die teenoorgestelde gereageer, met hoër opbrengste in die 1997/98 as in die 1996/97 seisoen.

Daar was geen betekenisvolle verskille tussen die droëmateriaal opbrengste van enige van die vyf grasspesies by geringe watertekorttoestande, in vergelyking met die geen watertekorte nie. Dit het geskied indien die grondprofiel aan die begin van die seisoen by veldkapasiteit was. Dit impliseer dat droëmateriaal opbrengste onderhou kan word in tye van geringe droogte, mits daar water in die grondprofiel gestoor is.

C. ciliaris, 'n bekende droogteverdraagsame spesie, het opbrengste ($11.7-20.0 \text{ t ha}^{-1}$) onder nie-kontrole toestande (W1, W2 en W3) geproduseer, wat vergelykbaar is met opbrengste wat onder kontrole water toestande (W4) vir tradisioneel besproeide grasses soos die *Cynodon baster* ($12.0-15.8 \text{ t ha}^{-1}$) en *P. clandestinum* ($5.6-11.8 \text{ t ha}^{-1}$) verkry is. *P. clandestinum*, *D. eriantha* en *P. maximum* was geneig om beter aangepas te wees by natter toestande, terwyl die *Cynodon baster* instaat was om goeie opbrengste onder beide waterbeperkende en nie-waterbeperkende toestande te produseer.

Waterverbruiksdoeeltreffendheid, ongeag die spesie, het geneig om beter by nie-kontrole toestande te wees. Die grasse was dus instaat om meer droëmateriaal te produseer per eenheid water verbruik, by toestande waar water beperk geraak het.

In vitro droëmateriaal verteerbaarheid was nie negatief deur watertekorte beïnvloed nie, terwyl ruproteïen inhoud meer dikwels, beter was by kontrole toestande. Dit kan toegeskryf word aan die opname meganisme van voedingstowwe waarby water 'n kern rol speel.

Die aantal stomas per eenheid oppervlakte was meer onder kontrole as by waterbeperkende toestande. Die voorkoms van die verskillende strukture op die blaaroppervlaktes, was nie deur die beskikbaarheid van water beïnvloed nie.

In die afwesigheid van watertekorte, was die groei van *C. ciliaris*, *D. eriantha* en *P. maximum*, bykans dubbel dié van die *Cynodon* baster en *P. clandestinum*, soos gemeet aan die einde van twee groeisiklusse.

In 'n potproef, onder glashuistoestande, met *C. ciliaris*, die *Cynodon* baster en *P. clandestinum*, is beide die vlak van waterbesikbaarheid en stikstof gevarieer. Onafhanklik van die spesie, en vlak van stikstof, is water meer doeltreffend verbruik onder nie-kontrole toestande. Hoër vlakke van stikstof het die watterverbruikdoeltreffendheid verbeter, onafhanklik van die vlak van waterbesikbaarheid. Soos met die toediening van meer water, het die toediening van meer stikstof ook tot 'n verhoging in droëmateriaalopbrengste aanleiding gegee. In hierdie proef het *C. ciliaris* en die *Cynodon* baster weer beter opbrengste as *P. clandestinum* gelewer.

Ter opsomming kan die gevolgtrekking gemaak word dat *C. ciliaris* en die *Cynodon* baster beter aangepas is by warm groeitoestande deur hoë opbrengste te lewer, onafhanklik van die vlak van water beskikbaar. *D. eriantha*, *P. maximum* en *P. clandestinum* kan ook goeie opbrengste lewer onder sulke wye water reeks groeitoestande, mits waterbesikbaarheid nie beperkend is nie. Onafhanklik van die grasspesie, het die plante water meer doeltreffend verbruik by nie-kontrole toestande, terwyl *in vitro* verteerbaarheid nie benadeel is deur watertekorte nie. As

gevolg van die opname meganisme van voedingstowwe, kan waterbeperkende toestande die ru-proteïen inhoud van grasplante wel benadeel. Hoër vlakke van stikstof het 'n positiewe invloed op beide droëmateriaal opbrengste en waterverbruiksdooeltreffendheid getoon.

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LIST OF TABLES

Chapter 2

Table 2.1	Minimum and maximum temperatures recorded at the Hatfield Experimental Farm, Pretoria, during the trial period.	16
Table 2.2	The percentage water use of the three treatments (W1, W2, W3) relative to that of the control (W4), over two seasons.	17

Chapter 3

Table 3.1	Yield data obtained from literature for <i>C. ciliaris</i> , the <i>Cynodon</i> hybrid, <i>D. eriantha</i> , <i>P. maximum</i> and <i>P. clandestinum</i> .	46
Table 3.2	Influence of level of water availability on the dry matter yield (t ha ⁻¹) of five perennial grasses.	51

Chapter 5

Table 5.1	Influence of level of water availability on the WUE _{DM} (kg DM ha ⁻¹ mm ⁻¹) of five perennial grasses.	97
Table 5.2	Influence of level of water availability on the digestible dry matter yield (t DDM ha ⁻¹) of five perennial grasses.	99
Table 5.3	Influence of level of water availability on the WUE _{DDM} (kg DDM ha ⁻¹ mm ⁻¹) of five perennial grasses.	100
Table 5.4	Influence of level of water availability on the crude protein yield (t CP ha ⁻¹) of five perennial grasses.	102
Table 5.5	Influence of level of water availability on the WUE _{CP} (kg ha ⁻¹ mm ⁻¹) of five perennial grasses.	103

Chapter 6

Table 6.1	Irrigation applied and rainfall recorded on the experimental farm during September 1997 till April 1998.	113
-----------	--	-----

Chapter 7

Table 7.1	Effect of the availability of water on the average number of stomata on the adaxial and abaxial leaf surfaces of five grass species.	163
-----------	--	-----

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 2

- Figure 2.1 Average water use of grass species at four levels of water availability in the 1996/97 season. 14
- Figure 2.2 Average water use of grass species at four levels of water availability in the 1997/98 season. 14
- Figure 2.3 Water use of five grass species at four levels of water availability, during the 1996/97 season. 22
- Figure 2.4 Water use of five grass species at four levels of water availability, during the 1997/98 season. 22
- Figure 2.5 Leaf areas of five grass species at four levels of water availability in the 1996/97 season. 23
- Figure 2.6 Leaf areas of five grass species at four levels of water availability in the 1997/98 season. 23
- Figure 2.7 Soil water deficits at the end of the growing season for *C. ciliaris* at four levels of water availability over two seasons. 26
- Figure 2.8 Soil water deficits at the end of the growing season for the *Cynodon* hybrid at four levels of water availability over two seasons. 27
- Figure 2.9 Soil water deficits at the end of the growing season for *D. eriantha* at four levels of water availability over two seasons. 28
- Figure 2.10 Soil water deficits at the end of the growing season for *P. maximum* at four levels of water availability over two seasons. 29
- Figure 2.11 Soil water deficits at the end of the growing season for *P. clandestinum* at four levels of water availability over two seasons. 30
- Figure 2.12 Dry mass of roots in the well watered control (W4) and the most water

limited treatment (W1) of five grass species. 33

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1(a) Average dry matter yield at four levels of water availability in the 1996/97 season. 49

Figure 3.1(b) Average dry matter yield of five subtropical perennial grasses in the 1996/97 season. 49

Figure 3.2(a) Average dry matter yield at four levels of water availability in the 1997/98 season. 49

Figure 3.2(b) Average dry matter yield of five subtropical perennial grasses in the 1997/98 season. 49

Figure 3.3 The contribution of different plant components to the production of five perennial grasses in the 1996/97 season. 54

Figure 3.4 The contribution of different plant components to the production of five perennial grasses in the 1997/98 season. 54

Figure 3.5 The contribution of different plant components to production as affected by four levels of water availability in the 1996/97 season. 56

Figure 3.6 The contribution of different plant components to production as affected by four levels of water availability in the 1997/98 season. 56

Chapter 4

Figure 4.1 Average *in vitro* dry matter digestibility and crude protein content of the whole plant, leaf and stem material of the grasses in the 1996/97 and 1997/98 seasons. 75

Figure 4.2 Whole plant dry matter digestibility of five grass species at four levels

	of water availability. 1996/97	76
Figure 4.3	Whole plant dry matter digestibility of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1997/98	76
Figure 4.4	Leaf dry matter digestibility of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1996/97	76
Figure 4.5	Leaf dry matter digestibility of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1997/98	76
Figure 4.6	Stem matter dry digestibility of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1996/97	76
Figure 4.7	Stem dry matter digestibility of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1997/98	76
Figure 4.8	Whole plant crude protein content of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1996/97	79
Figure 4.9	Whole plant crude protein content of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1997/98	79
Figure 4.10	Leaf crude protein content of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1996/97	79
Figure 4.11	Leaf crude protein content of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1997/98	79
Figure 4.12	Stem crude protein content of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1996/97	79
Figure 4.13	Stem crude protein content of five grass species at four levels of water availability. 1997/98	79

Chapter 5

Figure 5.1 The average dry matter water use efficiency of five grass species for four levels of water availability in the 1996/97 season. 96

Figure 5.2 The average dry matter water use efficiency of five grass species for four levels of water availability in the 1997/98 season. 96

Chapter 6

Figure 6.1 Relative growth rate of sub-tropical grasses over two growth cycles under irrigation. 117

Figure 6.2 Cumulative dry matter yield of five grass species over two growth cycles, under irrigation. 117

Figure 6.3 Cumulative leaf area of five grass species over each of two growth cycles. 118

Figure 6.4 Partitioning of assimilates to leaf, stem and inflorescence of five sub-tropical grass species. 119

Chapter 7

Figure 7.1 Illustration of silica bodies and (A - I) and micro-hairs (J - O) generally found on the epidermis of grasses. 130

Figure 7.2 Surface of the adaxial side of a *C. ciliaris* leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x50). 135

Figure 7.3 Surface of the adaxial side of a *C. ciliaris* leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x300). 135

Figure 7.4 A stoma found on the adaxial side of a *C. ciliaris* leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x2500). 136

Figure 7.5 Leaf edge of the adaxial side of a *C. ciliaris* leaf grown without any

	water stress (W4).	136
Figure 7.6	Abaxial surface of a <i>C. ciliaris</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x50).	137
Figure 7.7	Abaxial surface of a <i>C. ciliaris</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x300).	138
Figure 7.8	A stoma found on the abaxial side of a <i>C. ciliaris</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x2500).	138
Figure 7.9	Leaf edge of the abaxial side of a <i>C. ciliaris</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4).	139
Figure 7.10	Adaxial surface of a <i>Cynodon</i> hybrid leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x50).	141
Figure 7.11	Adaxial surface of a <i>Cynodon</i> hybrid leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x300).	141
Figure 7.12	A stoma found on the adaxial side of a <i>Cynodon</i> hybrid leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x2500).	142
Figure 7.13	Leaf edge of the adaxial side of a <i>Cynodon</i> hybrid leaf grown without any water stress (W4).	142
Figure 7.14	Abaxial surface of a <i>Cynodon</i> hybrid leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x50).	143
Figure 7.15	Abaxial surface of a <i>Cynodon</i> hybrid leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x300).	144
Figure 7.16	A stoma found on the abaxial side of a <i>Cynodon</i> hybrid leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x2500).	144
Figure 7.17	Leaf edge of the abaxial side of a <i>Cynodon</i> hybrid leaf grown without any water stress (W4).	145

Figure 7.18	Adaxial surface of a <i>D. eriantha</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x50).	146
Figure 7.19	Adaxial surface of a <i>D. eriantha</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x300).	147
Figure 7.20	A stoma found on the adaxial side of a <i>D. eriantha</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x2500).	147
Figure 7.21	Leaf edge of the adaxial side of a <i>D. eriantha</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4).	148
Figure 7.22	Abaxial surface of a <i>D. eriantha</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x50).	149
Figure 7.23	Abaxial surface of a <i>D. eriantha</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x300).	149
Figure 7.24	A stoma found on the abaxial side of a <i>D. eriantha</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x2500).	150
Figure 7.25	Leaf edge of the abaxial side of a <i>D. eriantha</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4).	150
Figure 7.26	Adaxial surface of a <i>P. maximum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x50).	151
Figure 7.27	Adaxial surface of a <i>P. maximum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x300).	152
Figure 7.28	A stoma found on the adaxial side of a <i>P. maximum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x2500).	152
Figure 7.29	Leaf edge of the adaxial side of a <i>P. maximum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4).	153
Figure 7.30	Abaxial surface of a <i>P. maximum</i> leaf grown without any water stress	

	(W4) (x50).	154
Figure 7.31	Abaxial surface of a <i>P. maximum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x300).	154
Figure 7.32	A stoma found on the abaxial side of a <i>P. maximum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x2500).	155
Figure 7.33	Leaf edge of the abaxial side of a <i>P. maximum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4).	155
Figure 7.34	Adaxial surface of a <i>P. clandestinum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x50).	156
Figure 7.35	Adaxial surface of a <i>P. clandestinum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x300).	157
Figure 7.36	A stoma found on the adaxial side of a <i>P. clandestinum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x2500).	157
Figure 7.37	Leaf edge of the adaxial side of a <i>P. clandestinum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4).	158
Figure 7.38	Abaxial surface of a <i>P. clandestinum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x50).	159
Figure 7.39	Abaxial surface of a <i>P. clandestinum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x300).	159
Figure 7.40	A stoma found on the abaxial side of a <i>P. clandestinum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4) (x2500).	160
Figure 7.41	Leaf edge of the abaxial side of a <i>P. clandestinum</i> leaf grown without any water stress (W4).	160
Figure 7.42	Number of stomata on the adaxial and abaxial leaf surface of five grass species without water stress.	162

Figure 7.43	Number of stomata on the adaxial leaf surface of five grass species as influenced by water availability.	164
Figure 7.44	Number of stomata on the abaxial leaf surface of five grass species as influenced by water availability.	164
Chapter 8		
Figure 8.1	Average water used at three levels of water availability.	176
Figure 8.2	Average water use at four levels of nitrogen fertilization.	176
Figure 8.3	The average water use of three grass species over all levels of water and nitrogen, as well as the water use of three grass species at four levels of nitrogen.	177
Figure 8.4	Average dry matter yield per plant as affected by three levels of water availability.	178
Figure 8.5	Average dry matter yield per plant as affected by four levels of nitrogen.	179
Figure 8.6	Average dry matter yield of three grass species over all levels of water availability and nitrogen.	180
Figure 8.7	Dry matter yield of three grass species as affected by three levels of water availability and four levels of nitrogen.	181
Figure 8.8	Average water use efficiency as affected by four levels of nitrogen.	182
Figure 8.9	Average water use efficiency of three grass species as affected by water availability and nitrogen.	183
Figure 8.10	Water use efficiency of three grass species as affected by three levels of water availability and four levels of nitrogen.	184
Figure 8.11	Affect of three levels of water availability and four levels of nitrogen on	

the above and below ground growth of *C. ciliaris*. 186

Figure 8.12 Affect of three levels of water availability and four levels of nitrogen on
the above and below ground growth of the *Cynodon* hybrid. 187

Figure 8.13 Affect of three levels of water availability and four levels of nitrogen on
the above and below ground growth of *P. clandestinum*. 188