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Desert saltbush species released

"Corto" Australian saltbush, *Atriplex semibaccata*, R.Br., has been released by the USDA and the Arizona Agricultural Experiment Station, for use as a ground cover for erosion control and beautification of highway rights-of-way, construction sites, and similar disturbed areas in the desert Southwest.

Australian saltbush is semiherbaceous plant that was introduced into California in the 1880's and various ecotypes have become naturalized in southern California, Arizona and New Mexico since.

"Corto" is a semiprostrate perennial plant, eight to 10 inches tall and spreads to a diameter of six feet. Stems become somewhat woody, but the plant is primarily herbaceous. Leaves are numerous and grey-green in color. The flowers are monoecious and inconspicuous. Male florets are located on the end of the stems. Female florets are located in the upper leaf axils. Fruits are fleshy and turn red at maturity. The fruit is subtended by two fruiting bracts that turn red with fruit maturity and exhibit fall colors from October through December.

"Corto" plants provide good cover with an annual precipitation of 10 to 12 inches. Hardiness limits have been established at about 3,500 feet in elevation. Older plants at Tucson, Ariz. are killed back to the crown by temperatures below 25°F. Young plants have withstood 17°F. temperatures at Tucson and recovered in the spring. It is probable that plants would be permanently damaged at temperatures less than 10°F. Plants are shortlived, but stands are reestablished from seed.

"Corto" is best adapted to light and medium textured soils. It is well adapted to saline-alkali sites. Tests conducted on mine tailings, overburden, and mixed tailings-overburden showed good plant vigor with pH readings of 7.8 to 8.2 and total soluble salts of 2,870 ppm, approximately four tons of soluble salts per acre.

No grazing studies have been done specifically with "Corto" Australian saltbush, but grazing studies in California reported Australian saltbush as a good forage plant for horses, cattle and sheep. Results of forage analysis show that the amount of digestible nutrients compares well with that of alfalfa.

"Corto" has approximately 246,000 seeds per pound. Seeding rates of seven pounds per acre pure live seed have resulted in adequate stands on critical areas. Late fall or early spring planting provide the cool season best for seedling establishment. Drilling the seed less than one-fourth inch into a firm, clean seedbed and compacting the soil around the seed results in good germination.

Breeder and Foundation seed will be maintained at the SCS Tucson Plant Materials Center, Tucson, Ariz. Foundation seed is available to growers through the Arizona Crop Improvement Association and Natural Resource Conservation Districts.