

Media Coverage

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New grain types head for release

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Three new barley varieties and five new wheat types are on the horizon for WA growers.

Edstar Genetics principal Ian Edwards, who has almost half a century's worth of experience in grain breeding, said the aim was to increase yields and be ahead of the market.

Many of the new wheat varieties being tested have out-yielded Wyalkatchem in preliminary trials, including the one likely to be released next year, B52, a widely adapted, early maturing strain that topped the national trials last year.

Oxford barley, which Dr Edwards released last year, has a 25 per cent yield advantage on Baudin and Gairdner, has better disease resistance and is less susceptible to frost.

"It stays in its vegetative state until late September so it can avoid some of the winter frosts," Dr Edwards said. "Then it shoots up its 6-7 tillers and fills its massive heads with larger seeds."

This year, Edstar will be releasing Henley; a barley which has already gained interest from international malting companies.

Henley is being looked at as a Baudin replacement for the export market because it has shown high quality characteristics suitable for enhanced enzyme activity needed in the malting process.

"The yield is not as good as Oxford but is still higher than Baudin," Dr Edwards said.

The third barley variety, Grange, is being looked at as a Gairdner replacement for the domestic malt market because of its high malt extract.

Starting out as a wheat breeder 45 years ago, Dr Edwards spent half his career in US wheat breeding company Pioneer Hi-Bred International and was a world-

wide director of field crop research.

He formed Edstar Genetics in 1998 when he retired to WA, then co-founded Grain Biotech Australia, retiring again as the chief executive in 2004.

Elders approached him later that year to continue his breeding in their seed company.

In 2009, Elders sold its seed company to Seedmark, which continued to fund Dr Edward's work.

He currently serves as chairman of the AgBio Advisory Group in AusBiotech, Australia's biotechnology organisation.

Edstar Genetics has 3500 WA plots in Dandaragan, Corrigin, Williams, Munglinup and Scaddan. They also have three sites in Victoria and three in New South Wales.

Before harvest they will pick out the best plants in the new trials to further examine and cross.

"Better knowledge of the parent plant and carefully targeted crosses is fundamental to the success of any breeding program," Dr Edwards said.

"All of the trials are conventional varieties and not genetically modified, but these are the crops that the GM will need to be crossed with in order to make them viable in WA.

"When it comes to breeding barley, varieties can be moved around the world, but with wheat, you really need to do your homework at home."

The Toodyay plot has been running for six seasons and is already delivering.

"In six years we have got serious product on the move — it sets a new standard in speed to market," Dr Edwards said. "The old days of 10-12 years are over, we can now develop a new variety from cross to commerce in 5-7 years."