Ruby saltbush (Enchylaena tomentosa)

Vineyards in the warm inland areas of Australia are well suited to the use of the prostrate form of ruby saltbush as a ground cover. While the erect and woodier form is more commonly seen and has been used in vineyards, the prostrate form provides better weed suppression and will not puncture tyres in the same way the erect form does after mowing. During the summer/autumn period the plants produce large quantities of fruit which is pink/red/purple in the prostrate form and yellow/orange/green in the erect form. The dense mat formed by the prostrate plants may extend to over a metre in diameter to suppress weeds, provide habitat for beneficial insects and shade the soil surface. As an Australian native plant of coastal and inland regions, ruby saltbush will readily endure the harsh summers in the vineyard mid-rows with little or no impact on vine production.

Soil types
Saltbushes are adapted to soil textures from sands to clay loams and ranging from the coast to the interior, often where free lime is prevalent and fertility is low. As halophytes, they are also tolerant of moderate soil salinity.

Uses
Ruby saltbush will provide year round ground cover in vineyard mid-rows, suppress the growth of summer weeds and provide habitat for beneficial invertebrates.

Cultural practices
Seed should be germination tested prior to planting, and if it is below 70-80% then chemical priming should be tried (Christopher Loo, Kings Park Botanic Gardens, pers comm. 2010). This involves soaking seeds in an aerobic solution of 0.20M (20 grams per litre of water) potassium nitrate for 17-20 hours, extracting and drying at room temperature. The seed also prefers to germinate in dark conditions, so burial of the seed is required for best results.

Ruby saltbush is sown in mid-late winter. Clean dry seed can be sown through conventional seeding equipment, but may require agitation to prevent the seed sticking together.

Once established the management requirements are very low with one mowing in spring to top tall growing winter weeds being all that is usually necessary. Ruby saltbush is also quite palatable to stock, so grazing is possible but with care.
Prostrate ruby saltbush (Enchylaena tomentosa)

Prostrate ruby saltbush fruit (Photo courtesy of Tony Hoare, Hoare Consulting)

Further reading

