

S.G.A.P. ACACIA STUDY GROUP
NEWSLETTER
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Welcome to the Group.

Mrs Stiller is our first Queenslander and the Group now has at least one representative from each State as well as one from New Zealand. Thank you, Mrs Stiller, for your letter describing your new garden.

In this communication I am attempting to answer your question ie the best potting soil for containers. I regret I have no spare copies of previous Newsletters, but for the information of our many recent new members, I will select the more important items from earlier publications and summarise them in an addenda to future reports.

Further to small wattles and planting methods. At Montrose in heavy clay soil seedlings are planted on top of the ground, only the superficial inch or so being disturbed and broken up. No hole is dug at all, the soil is simply heaped up around the specimen and despite many gloomy predictions of failure, the soil has not washed away and plants are growing well. The specimens are planted in good garden loam and erosion is prevented by covering them with some of the local clay. If you have a heavy soil this method is important as it ensures perfect drainage until the roots work their way through the hard ground, which they will easily do if not waterlogged. I pass this information on to you before you learn the lesson the hard way as we did. From 1950 to 1953 the first 200 specimens, on the advice of many experienced gardeners, were placed in good deep holes and planted in mid autumn, just before the rains. Result – these holes filled with water which remained there until the Spring. Further result – many died and most failed to thrive. All our planting is now done in late summer – about the end of March. The second essential for the successful starting of any type of plant is a cool moist root system. In short, you must mulch your wattles as you would every other plant. I have found the best for this is half rotted compost but as I can never get enough, the more recent method of mulching with small sized gravel is now used and this works well.

I understand that a goodly proportion of gardeners hold that this is as far as it is necessary to go with Australian plants, although of recent times there has been a swing towards treating natives like others in the garden. I believe that though many natives will grow in poor soils, they will grow better in better soils and that though some will manage without any attention they will do better if given ordinary garden care.

What of manure? Until recently it was regarded as being almost suicidal to use any kind of manure on natives. Now authorities are agreed that a suitable fertilizer is beneficial to Acacias and others. All wattles here during their first 2 years are given a dressing of blood and bone in September and again in November. They are watered in dry weather, staked to combat high winds and kept reasonably weed free. At the end of two years they are on their own. Pruning, as has been described previously, is regarded as an essential to the health, longevity and shape of these plants. The dwarfs we are talking about simply require trimming to shape after flowering. You can of course prune at any time so long as you don't mind losing a season's flowering.

Where to grow them? In general the feeling is that wattles like open sun but it is a fact I believe, that some are suited by partial shade. I don't know the names of these and if anyone can help, please do so. Small Acacias are eminently suitable for rockery or tub planting but may, of course, be planted in the open. Those to 3 feet are most attractive as rockery specimens, but it is to the possibility of growing them in containers I would like you to think about. This has been done over the past 2 years at Montrose with quite a few types and although it is too early to draw any conclusions the growth and health of these to the present has been heartening. Try out 2 or 3 for yourselves, using your own methods. The only advice I would offer with any degree of certainty is to have a container which will accommodate an adequate amount of soil. The large sized plastic dust bins have been used here and appear suitable – they hold 4 kerosene tins of soil – but are too expensive now and you may be able to think up something suitable of the same capacity.

The soil medium, provided other requirements are attended to is not, in my opinion, dramatically important. If we are blessed with a rich or well textured soil one would feel inclined to use it unchanged. If of poor quality, various additions, loam etc will be necessary to lighten it and give better drainage. I can't see that the nature of the addition matters, so long as it fulfils its purpose. Originally equal parts of clay soil and good garden loam were used. Then

pure loam was tried. The latter dried out too quickly and the former appeared too heavy so the present idea is to use two parts of loam to one part of clay and this is satisfactory.

Reasons for suggesting the use of containers are threefold.

1. To find out if the smallest shrubs will grow better and live just as long if circumscribed.
2. To help to persuade people to take an interest in and grow Acacias. The only way to do this is to display specimens of some size and of course, in blossom. Note how modern nurserymen are growing plants, to quite a good size in pots, until they are large enough to exhibit the full beauty of the flowers. Outstanding examples are the Rhododendrons and Azaleas which are so prized nowadays simply because they are properly displayed. The above example convinces me that a little branch of wattle with a few leaves and flowers stuck in a small bottle at a Wildflower Show gives no idea of the true worth of the specimen and makes people say (as they often do) "all wattles look the same to me". Also, if in suitable tubs they can be moved with little trouble for exhibition outside the home garden. As I said in a previous letter, a few so displayed at "Garden Week" last year created such an impression that the Editress of the Victorian SGAP Newsletter gave the matter some publicity and said she had no idea that some of the Acacias were so attractive.
3. And this may be a long shot. I have an idea that some wattles which will not grow well in any S. Victoria, can be persuaded to grow a long way from their place of origin and in different climates if given a proper start, which means a decent root system, before planting out. This means 12-18 months in an adequate container. Adequate in this case would refer to one the size of a small plastic bucket which costs only a few shillings.

Now these are personal views and you will disagree with some or many of them, which means that the matter is now open for discussion. In short, I want your criticisms etc and also the names of small wattles not already on our list. The next Newsletter, and I hope the following one too, will be devoted solely to extracts from your reports which I trust I will receive in quantity.

Kindly remember that you don't require to have a lot of wattles growing – or any for that matter – to make your opinion worthwhile. You will all be growing some type of Australian plants and the general principles are the same.

Before concluding I must thank Mr Holliday for his donation of seeds of the following, nearly all of which are the dwarfs we want to grow – *A. spinescens*, *A. rotundifolia*, *A. bynoeana*, *A. merrallii*, *A. drummondii*, *A. craspedocarpa*, *A. farinosa*. I will comment on the height of the shrubs you mention in our next Newsletter, Mr Holliday.

We still need seed badly, seed of every kind of wattle. At the best the seed bank has only limited numbers, so send all you can collect whether the bank already has a supply or not.

Finally, I acknowledge with thanks letters from Mrs Chandler, Mrs McHaffey and Mr Croll. They will form a nucleus for the February comments.

The Season's compliments to everyone.