

Eremophilas

Diana Snape

From the February 2009 issue of the Study Group Newsletter.

Conferences are not always exciting but the one I attended recently was. A biennial seminar commemorating Fred Rogers, a pioneer and early leader in growing Australian plants, focuses on a single genus of plants. Held in Horsham, this seminar broke all attendance records and, sadly, some people had to be turned away. A regional conference that attracts almost 400 people must have something special going for it - and this year that special focus was the genus *Eremophila*.

Much celebrated by Victorian gardeners already acquainted with them, eremophilas are still unknown to most Australians. However, for over 30 years they've been studied by a group of enthusiasts who belong to the Eremophila Study Group of the Australian Native Plants Society (Australia). Members of this Study Group have searched for eremophilas throughout Australia, especially in the drier areas where they flourish ('eremophila' means 'desert-lover'). They have (with permission) collected seeds and cutting material to propagate new species or forms, then trialled them as garden plants. Some species grew easily, others had to be grafted onto a myoporum (a close relative with tougher roots) for success.

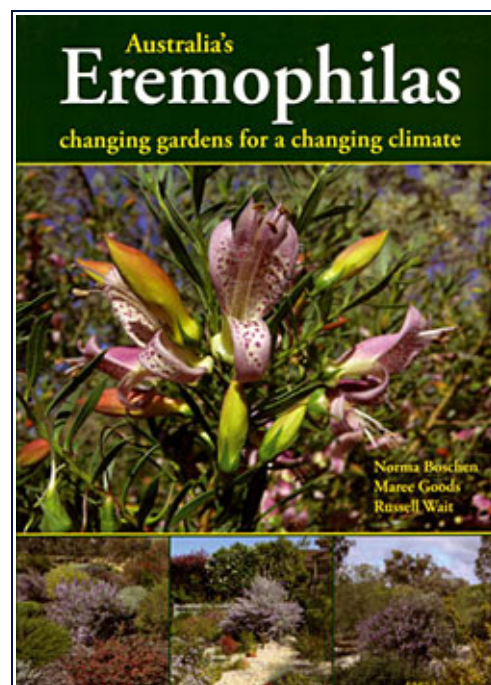
Now the results of years of patient work have been published in a beautiful book, "*Australia's Eremophilas: changing gardens for a changing climate*". Launched at the conference, it was written by Maree Goods, Norma Boschen and Russell Wait. For the home gardener it is a treat, illustrated with lovely photographs and containing all the information necessary to help in selection and cultivation. Many appealing forms, hybrids and cultivars are described.

During the conference, we visited colourful gardens filled with eremophilas - cameras were kept busy! Excitement reached a peak when we visited a local nursery, the Wimmera Native Plant Nursery at Dimboola. Even those who had sent orders beforehand couldn't resist buying additional plants from the wonderful variety on sale. The rarer species are not yet generally available in nurseries but others are. These include many attractive forms of hardy Fuchsia-bush or Common Emu-bush, *E. glabra*, (in vivid yellow, orange or red) and Native Fuchsia or Spotted Emu-bush, *E. maculata*, (adding pinks to this colour range).

Other eremophilas feature white, cream, mauve and purple flowers. If you happen to travel to Port Augusta, visit the wonderful Arid Lands Botanic Garden to see the extensive range growing there. Though most are small to medium shrubs, eremophilas range in size from groundcovers to small trees. Their tubular flowers are decorative for many months and some species have a spectacular calyx that may persist long after petals have fallen. The little shrub *E. flaccida* (an outstanding pot plant) has mauve-pink calyx with purple petals, while medium-sized *E. platycalyx* has delicate mauve plus white with lilac spots. Different forms can have different flower colours too, as in the large shrub *E. lucida* (from pure white to brick red). In some species, changing colours produce a striking effect - a long time favourite, *E. racemosa* has two different forms, one changing from orange buds to pink flowers, the other yellow to white. As green-leaved groundcovers, I've found *E. subteretifolia* (orange-red flowers), *E. biserrata* (lime-purple) and *E. debilis* (round pink berries) all excellent. I've seen *E. serpens* (lime-purple) and *E. glabra* "Mingenew Gold" (bright yellow) both covering large areas with dense foliage. Nearer the other end of the size scale, I've recently planted *E. oppositifolia* (Twin-leaf Emu-bush) as a fence-screen. Its petals and sepals are a 'mix and match' of colours from white, cream, pink, mauve and purple. *E. miniata*, another suitable large shrub, also comes in a range of colours, from lovely pastel shades to rich dark purple-red.

Some eremophilas exhibit distinctive forms, like tall, slender *E. calhorabos* and conifer-like *E. interstans*. Showy, medium-sized eremophilas, particularly suitable for pots, include *E. mirabilis* (pretty pastel tones), *E. cuneifolia* (pale to deep shades of pink and blue), *E. muelleriana* (deep wine against felty grey-green leaves) and *E. lachnocalyx*, displaying deep lilac against silver-grey foliage. Many eremophilas have this appealing combination of lilac flowers with the silvery grey foliage that shows adaptation to

Australia's Eremophilas: changing gardens for a changing climate



hot, dry conditions. For years I've considered *E. nivea* an outstandingly beautiful shrub but *E. delisseri* is reputedly even more beautiful.

It's a wonderful achievement to have studied a whole genus of plants (215 species), most new to cultivation, recording their success under different garden regimes. As a gardener, I'm truly grateful. If you weren't fortunate enough to be at the conference, the availability of the book is a great compensation. Having attended a helpful practical workshop, I'm about to try my luck grafting some eremophilas onto *Myoporum insulare* root stock.