



Garden Design Using Australian Plants: Why Such a Late Start?

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I think most of us are probably gardeners. Just as we are the products of our genetic inheritance and the environment we live in, so our gardens are the product of our cultural inheritance and our environment. For over 200 years it's our cultural heritage that has dominated gardening in Australia. Only lately have we begun to acknowledge the realities of our Australian environment - the very different plants and colour palette of this country, as well as the practical considerations. These include shallow, infertile soils and erratic climate, with unreliable rainfall and the current 10-year drought.

From the very first settlement, some people saw the beauty of Australian plants, so perfectly adapted to this sometimes challenging environment. Most settlers were understandably nostalgic for the gardens and plants they had left behind in the cool, moist, fertile soils of England. These were the gardens they bravely tried to recreate here. Research has shown that most people are influenced by their parents' garden and, in turn, influence their childrens' gardens and their childrens' childrens'. This pattern was repeated and reinforced by later waves of immigrants. So here we are, 200 years on, with most gardens in Australia still firmly nostalgic, looking way back to the British Isles on the other side of the world. For many of us, 'sense of place' is English rather than Australian, at odds with the country we live in.

It's not just the private gardens of course. The horticultural industry in Australia also carried on with the English tradition. Even today it largely consists of horticulturists, nursery owners, gardeners, designers, writers and television presenters whose expertise lies in plants from elsewhere, not Australia. This industry has become entrenched, a long-established closed loop.

As late as 1960, when Brian and I started our first garden in Sydney, we could find only two gardening books with information about Australian plants. There was so much to learn - about the plants themselves and the sometimes unexpected results when they were grown in garden conditions. The Australian Plant Society was started in 1957 (as SGAP) to do just that.

The breakthrough of interest in Australian plants in the 60s and 70s was limited by four main factors:

- first, a lack of horticultural knowledge;
- second, the small range of Australian plants available in nurseries;
- next, the fact that many of these were trees and large shrubs, too big for small suburban gardens;
- and fourth, the 'no maintenance' myth - for example people didn't realize that Australian plants had always been pruned - by storms, wind, fire, salt air, insects and marsupials.

So the fashion in Australian plants was short-lived.

Over the last 46 years, since that first garden of ours, this situation has changed dramatically.

- First, an enormous amount of research work has been carried out by members of organizations such as APS and a small number of Botanic Gardens and Universities. Literally hundreds of books have been written, including the wonderful 8-volume Encyclopaedia of Australian Plants. Information on their cultivation is now readily available.
- Second, there are now superb specialist nurseries with a marvellous range of Australian plants of all types, in all shapes and sizes. These include selected varieties, hybrids and cultivars. Even many general nurseries stock a modest range.
- Next, this availability is also true for numerous small plants - shrubs, groundcovers, daisies, annuals, lilies, orchids, grasses and many more.
- Fourth, people realize maintenance is important, for example pruning.
- In addition, gardens of these plants can now be visited in the Open Garden Scheme.

And all this means we can at last design a garden using Australian plants.

...and - not in my introduction - this is our opportunity as members of the GDSG to show what can be done. If we don't do it, who will?