

# The Importance of Australia's Indigenous Plants

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In an "Ockham's Razor" talk last year, Rob Morrison pointed out the devastating lack of knowledge and concern most Australians have about our small marsupial mammals. All attention is focused on a few large, conspicuous ones (such as the red kangaroo), which have become token symbols. We have more emotional involvement with animals than with plants, so I think there is an even greater problem with our native plant life. Almost everyone in Australia knows of eucalypts and acacias (gum trees and wattles), but not that there are over 700 different species of each. Flowers such as grevilleas, banksias and boronias are popular, but there are thousands of native plants of all shapes and sizes, of which most Australians are profoundly ignorant. Does it matter if people are more "at home" with exotic plants than native plants? I think it does, for a range of reasons.

The first concerns our sense of national identity. We live in a land of space and open horizons: the emptiness, the dryness, the majesty of its vast interior are intimidating. Inland vegetation is adapted to harsh conditions which do not permit compromise, but most of us live on the well-watered coastal fringe with its relatively lush vegetation. For example the small state of Victoria occupies a mere 3% of Australia's total area, but a quarter of Australia's population lives there (and most are in Melbourne). There is little unity of experience between any contact with wilderness or 'the bush', the soul of our country, and everyday life in the artificial environment of our towns and suburbs. This can result in a sense of alienation - a feeling of insecurity.

Voss, in Patrick White's book, says "I will cross the continent from one end to the other. I have every intention to know it with my heart." I think today many Australians are in sympathy with Voss's aim, but others fail to see that wilderness areas like the inland deserts with their finely tuned plants have their own beauty. Many people still regard even eucalypts and acacias as "primitive landscape and elements - unfamiliar, strangely primeval - which must be eradicated from the home environment". This description comes from Robin Boyd's book, *The Australian Ugliness*, written in 1960. This ugliness, he said, "begins with fear of reality, denial of the need for the everyday environment to reflect the heart ...". I think this fear and denial still exist, and they begin with our own Australian landscape.

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The second reason for knowing our plants is related to the first, but has a more practical slant. Plants are the basis of any ecosystem. Our native mammals depend on the plants they have evolved with to provide for their needs - food, shelter, habitat. A few toughies survive change (the large kangaroos in rural areas, possums in the suburbs), but the majority of animals succumb to the destruction of their natural environment, for building, mining, farming or whatever. If we want to save our native animals, we must first retain our native plants in large enough areas to be sustainable. Just over 5% of Australia's surface is now reserved as wilderness areas or national, state and forest parks. (95% is not.) These areas vary greatly in spacing, size and integrity; many are threatened by feral animals and introduced weeds. All those where natural ecosystems still exist are valuable beyond any price. They must be preserved and if possible extended. Each could be thought of as a vital nucleus, from where threads of native vegetation could be drawn out through the countryside to provide a network or web of corridors of natural habitat. The web would be sparse in inland Australia, but denser in more fertile areas. Even rainforest is surprisingly tough and resilient, except to fire and bulldozers.

Since the Aboriginal people first started using fire here thousands of years ago, the Australian landscape has been modified by people. Eucalypts and acacias thrived under the regime of fire and, because major changes were slow, animal populations had time to adjust. During the last 200 years, however, plants and their ecosystems vanished rapidly from the huge areas of Australia. Some clearing was inevitable, but much was carried out in ignorance of the possible consequences. An excess of zeal resulted in the enormous problems of soil erosion, dryland salting and habitat loss we face today. In the last ten years, Landcare programmes and Greening Australia have begun the fight to combat these problems, and a third compelling reason emerges for knowing and appreciating our native flora. Trees are being replanted - not just any native trees, but mixtures of those indigenous to an area, the

real locals. Plantings are carried out in pockets on properties and around their boundaries, along creeks, by roadsides, on waste land. At the same time as senseless clearing still occurs in some places, corridors of the plants that belong are gradually returning to many areas of Australia. Slowly these corridors creep through the countryside, ideally to link ultimately with those which could spread from wilderness areas and parks. This healing web is just beginning to bind Australia together again, though it's more difficult to restore the total mix of plants, the ground flora as well as the trees and large shrubs.

What about the cities and sprawling suburbs where most of us live? In his book, Robin Boyd castigated Australians for the ugliness of the featurist landscape, and Australian architecture for its chief characteristic of inconsistency. He wrote "Absurdly proud, alone in a vacuum, each new Australian building sets out to create an isolated, competitive grain of beauty". Part of the problem is that these criticisms apply equally to our use of plants, where featurism and inconsistency do nothing to visually link those individual buildings together. 30 years on we have made a little progress with the hard landscape - garish buildings and features are less prominent - but street trees are still regularly mutilated to accommodate powerlines strung between poles. The beauty we could have in our soft landscape remains a distant dream. Many gardens grow in the suburbs, with abundant plants, so superficially everything looks quite nice, but have you ever had a really good look at the plantscape you live in? Usually it has no co-ordination and certainly no Australian theme; it's just a random mixture of plants - exotic, introduced native and indigenous. I think these plants do not all have equal rights in Australia. Some introduced ones like blackberries and weeping willows are as destructive in their own way as feral animals.

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How can our urban landscape be made more beautiful and more appropriate for Australia? We need a vision, a plan to counter the lack of cohesion. Many local councils are showing the way. They are using indigenous plants in urban forests, in reserves, in parks and gardens, beside creeks and in street plantings. This must be an essential part of the answer - to use indigenous plants wherever possible to link us to our land and give us a sense of place. There are precious, isolated patches of remnant bushland in the suburbs, where some of those small marsupials have managed to survive. These oases need corridors to link them and extend the indigenous network. Street trees are obviously very important, but far too often they are exotic. A whole street of deciduous trees does look superb for a short time in autumn, but not so nice in winter. If a smaller number of deciduous trees were set against a background of native evergreens, the corridor would be maintained and the autumn beauty too. We could even use clusters of native trees rather than have them widely spaced in neat rows.

Ideally in landscapes around commercial and industrial buildings (as well as in government or council-controlled open space) a framework of indigenous plants would be used. Other natives would be chosen next, before exotic plants. Trees, shrubs, groundcovers, creepers, ferns and cycads, lilies and grasses - there are native plants suitable to achieve almost any effect that is required in a landscape, even a formal landscape where buildings dominate. If we can't accept a natural environment of Australian plants in our local streets, parks and gardens, how can we ever come to terms with life in this southern continent? Surely using the enormous variety of our own plants successfully is the starting point for Australian landscape design. Native plants are often different in form, foliage and character from exotic plants. Their use in landscaping depends on appreciation of them for themselves, their balance and subtlety and boldness, their natural associations. For years a few landscape architects and designers have been creating landscapes with indigenous and other native plants, but many have not. What constraints have delayed the wider use of Australian native plants in both public and private landscapes? Several obvious ones can be identified.

Initially, knowledge of the requirements for their cultivation was limited and not very accessible. It accumulated slowly, as reflected by the number of books written about Australian plants. In the 50's and 60's only a handful of books were published. Interest in growing Australian plants expanded, but misinformation led to mistakes which discouraged all but enthusiasts. The rush of books began in the 70's and became a deluge in the 80's, when over 50 books appeared, including the first four volumes of the "Encyclopaedia of Australian Plants". The first constraint, lack of horticultural knowledge, is fast disappearing.

Another need is for more nurseries prepared to stock a wide variety of native plants. Pioneer nurseries have been specialising in natives for many years, and more recently some have begun to supply plants indigenous to specific areas. However, most nurseries still have a very limited range of native plants, or none at all. The third constraint is to me both surprising and disturbing. As far as I have been able to find out, Australia has no tertiary institutions such as horticultural colleges which have any course on horticulture and landscape design using Australian native plants. These last two constraints must inhibit the development of truly Australian landscape design.

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In the last few years I have visited every Australian state, looking at both natural landscapes and gardens, and everywhere I have found people consciously growing indigenous plants in their own gardens. Recently the book "Flora of Melbourne" was published, describing all those plants which originally grew in the Melbourne area. With such information available, we can work towards re-introducing natural ecosystems into home gardens, bringing the sounds and perfumes of the bush. Indigenous plants benefit native

birds, lizards, butterflies and other insects, and they don't preclude growing other plants too.

This concern about our plants is not all selfless and altruistic. Tourism is now the highest-earning export industry. Visitors are attracted by our clear skies, our wide open spaces and our unique ecology. The Australian landscape and its plants are different from those of other countries, and we must make more effort to keep it that way. I don't think we should be unreasonable about it, but if indigenous or other native plants are suitable for a job, why use exotic plants? Can we have national self-respect when the courtyards of our Parliament House in Canberra are landscaped with silver birches? We seem to exhibit the cultural or colonial cringe even in our gardens.

I suspect if we were truly at home in our own small patch of Australia, familiar with its landscape and its indigenous plants, perhaps with a few such plants in our gardens, then we would feel more at home in all of Australia. Our disparate suburbs could be coordinated by an attractive matrix of indigenous plants, part of the network extending throughout the country. Those small marsupials should have more chance too, and more of us would learn the difference between a house mouse and a hopping mouse.