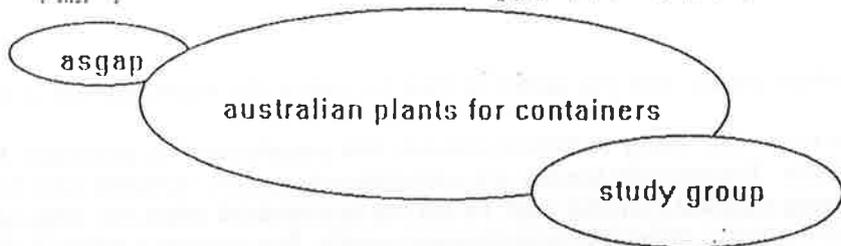


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NEWSLETTER

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The editor's bit

Gwen Elliot says in her introduction to "Australian Plants for Small Gardens and Containers" that "one of the aims of this book is to encourage home gardeners to try something different and extend their knowledge and experience in regard to Australian plants". I'd like to feel that in this Study Group we could do just that and use our knowledge and experience to encourage the wider community to grow Australian plants in a container, either inside, on a balcony, patio or beside the front door.

I have grown plants in pots for years, but only in the past ten years have they been Australian plants. I started growing some *Dendrobium spp* in the early 1980's, and gave them away when we moved to Tasmania in 1987. Two years later, when we returned, some of their progeny were given back to me, and still flourish.

Why do I grow plants in containers? We have about one third of an acre of garden, mostly with Australian plants, but I do like a few pots on the patio and around the front entrance. I like to be able to move them around (like pictures in the house). It does mean that I can grow some plants which would be difficult, (or impossible) to grow out in the garden.

Early this year I decided to reduce the number of plants in containers - why? - a desire to have fewer growing, but ensuring those that were left would be looking happy, and fewer for my aging, kind neighbours to water when we go away. The garden manages well, but the pot plants don't. That, I guess, is the big drawback - watering - especially through the summer and when away.

With the reduction in size of many gardens in inner urban and the outer suburban spread, and an increasing number of people living in units/apartments, there must be a growing interest in flowering potted plants as well as ferns and palms. It would be great to see a wider variety available in the general nurseries - not only native plant specialists.

I recently saw in a nursery/garden shop in the main street of Alexandria, Victoria, a lovely selection of *Banksia spinulosa*, "Giant Candles", in a dwarf form, ideal for container cultivation.

Keep your eyes open, and do let us know what container plants you see in the general nursery/plant shops - Australian of course.

In this big country - with so many variations in climate, and with each of us having different micro-climates in our own garden, it is important that we share this information when talking about the plants that we grow. Quoting D.K.McIntyre and J.W.Wrigley in their "Guidelines for Study Groups" - 'One important thing to keep in mind is that information about failures can be as important, if not more important, than successes.'

I'm looking forward to hearing your experiences; and tips that you may have for all of us - what plants grow well for you - and what don't!



Australian Native Plants as Bonsai - by Tracey Perrott

Many people believe that bonsai is an unnatural method of plant torture, but to me it is simply maintaining plants indefinitely in containers. What's more, the theory behind the art of bonsai is fundamentally a wild process, where plants naturally germinate and grow in small rock cracks, (eg. the Grampians), and are characteristically dwarfed in appearance. Coastal dune and sea-cliff habitats are renowned for their wind-blown shrubs and trees, where the elements create uniquely fascinating, and ancient-appearing plants. Australia is considered an age-old land, and bonsai can be symbolic of the intricate environmental processes that shape the natural landscape.

The technique of bonsai has been described as a living art-form, a three-dimensional, live sculpture with an added fourth dimension: time. As a bonsai is alive, it is never finished, and exhibits seasonal change. Creating a bonsai doesn't mean you have to adhere to the formal rules and Japanese traditions, with their sometimes artificial methods of presentation. What is most important in creating a bonsai is not a theory or technique, but

a deep passion for Australian plants, and the ability to look to nature for inspiration on a beautiful form or balanced plant shape.

Creating your own bonsai is not the highly technical process that people tend to envisage. Nor does it take hundreds of years to achieve. Traditionally bonsai are painstakingly grown, nurtured and manipulated from seed, or are collected already dwarfed from the wild. To me the first method takes too long, while the second encourages degradation of the bush, often with unsuccessful results. The process I follow is commonly known as the sculptural technique, which turns potbound, old leggy nursery plants into living works of art.

The container maintenance process of pruning, fertilising, watering and repotting are all bonsai care techniques. The main difference is the volume of medium used, with repotting often occurring back into the same pot. Principles of topiary pruning are utilised to full advantage, with additional root pruning as well. Like most container plants, watering and feeding is crucial, due to the small amount of medium used to support the plant. Place bonsai in a sheltered, partially shaded position on a gravel-filled water tray for close to ideal moisture requirements. Repotting with fresh media and slow release fertiliser for natives provides sufficient nutrients for two or three years.

There many native species suited to bonsai culture, from trees such as *Allocasuarina* and *Melaleucas*, to shrubs such as the tea-tree cultivars. All it takes is a little courage and creativity to form your own living container sculpture that, with a bit of TLC, will give you enjoyment for many years to come.

(Tracey is an energetic member of the Peninsula Group of VicSGAP. Last year she had a display of her bonsai at the Mornington Peninsula Art Gallery in conjunction with an art exhibition of Garden paintings. She is kept very busy at Facey's Nursery, near Cranbourne, Vic.)



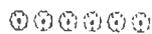
a Christmas tree?

What will you be using for a Christmas tree? For years we had an *Actinostrobus pyramidalis*. This West Australian plant which can grow 3 to 8 metres tall in the wild. I had in a container (32 x 30cm) for six years. It made a neat little (52cm) bush on the patio and useful for Christmas - it amused my small grandson because he had never seen one like it. It was dense and attractive, then it became a bit straggly, with some brown leaves. I planted it out into the garden but it lasted less than a year (a dry year and I didn't water it enough - too much of a shock for it, I think).

Currently, my delight and Christmas tree (if I need one) is a Huon pine, *Lagarostrobus franklenii* - growing naturally in the cool rainforests of south-west Tasmania where the rainfall is in the vicinity of 2500 mm annually.

This plant was given to me in a tube in 1989, having been grown from seed by Jill Roberts of Leith, near Devonport, Tasmania; she sowed them in the Bicentennial year. I brought it to Balnarring, (on the Mornington peninsula, south of Melbourne) where our annual rainfall is 800 - 900 mm, and it is not quite so cool as SW Tasmania. This little tree is now 10 years old and four pots larger (now 32 x 30 cm), and is enjoyed by us both. I frequently tip prune it, using the pendulous branchlets with their close scale-like leaves, as foliage in vases around the house - sometimes with flowers such as *Correas*, *Bauera rubiodes*, *Bracteantha bracteata* and various *Leptospermum spp*, or on its own. It lasts indoors for up two months. Last year, several pieces in a vase developed roots, so I planted them - and now the little fellas are growing happily. I intend to Bonsai a couple.

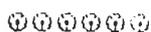
At the end of winter, I shall repot it again with John's help - pruning the roots and top and then back into the same container. I do hope it survives. It is a most unusual shape. The trunk is 11 cm high, the whole plant 30 cm high and 78 cm across. I'll let you know how we get on!



Hibbertia (Guinea flowers)

I love these yellow-gold rounded flowers, especially when walking in the heathland or open forest/woodland areas. In East Gippsland last year on a wildflower walk, everyone was *oohing* and *ahing* at the orchids, but I delight in the bright yellow areas, so colorful from late winter through to summer. However, apart from *H.scandens* (very tough) we haven't been too successful with this species in our garden.

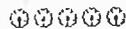
Two years ago I grew a beauty in a container - *Hibbertia stellaris*, a West Australian species with orange star-like flowers. It only lasted 18 months. I should have taken some cuttings and will do so next time I grow it. I intend to grow a couple of species in a container, and monitor them. What success have you had?



"Semi" Bonsai cultivation

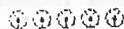
On most Sunday mornings there is a market near the State theatre/concert hall complex in Melbourne with a gentleman who is a true bonsai artist. I do enjoy watching him work. He has some lovely specimens of *Allocasuarina*, *Callitris*, *Leptospermum* and *Melaleuca* which look just great in bonsai form. I shall never attempt his heights of artistry, but I have been tempted to grow a couple of *Kunzea ericoides* (Burgan) in a small pot, and prune its branches regularly (not using wire or a bonsai container). These were self-sown seedlings from the garden and became pot-bound when I left them in tubes.

I pruned both roots and tips quite drastically - and so far they are looking good. I can bring them indoors if I need to, but I am not an indoor plant person.
(*Bonsai* is Japanese for 'to plant in a shallow vessel').



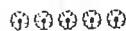
from a past Newsletter

In Newsletter No 17 of March 1997, there was a most interesting article by Colleen Keena, called "*Small Hibiscus and Hibiscus-like plants in pots*". Colleen lives in SE Queensland and has had considerable success with these species. Have any other members grown any of the *Malvaceae* family in containers? Please share your experiences with us. I grow *Hibiscus trionum* in the garden and love the way it 'self-seeds' - must try some in a pot. I enjoy the cream colored flowers with their prominent purple centre and yellow stamens. They continued throughout our latest long dry summer in Balnarring, in open sunny areas or partial shade. Their globular seed capsules are attractive too - a bonus. I cut them back to about 15 cm and they come back again for a second year. They are an annual or biennial herb, growing 0.5-1.0 metre high. I see in *Encyclopaedia of Australian Plants* that they are susceptible to frosts, but our 2 degrees this winter doesn't seem to have worried them so far.



Cordyline aff. stricta (Queensland, NSW)

I have this plant in the open garden. Two years ago when cutting back, I grew some stem cuttings which were most successful. I kept one in a container for a year but eventually gave it to my daughter for her garden, where I see it is flourishing. I imagine this plant could be another one for interior places such as entrance foyers, offices etc. Its virtually blue/black flowers are 'different', to say the least. It may not flower indoors.



INDOORS?

An excellent chapter in Gwen Elliott's book *Australian Plants for small gardens and Containers*, is chapter 9 on Indoor Plants and their Maintenance (p99). I would like to hear from anyone who grows Australian plants indoors. What plants do you grow; how successful are you, and do you alternate indoors and outdoors for a period of time?



TITBITS

On the ABC-TV Gardening Australia program on July 10, Malcolm Campbell's segment on 'Container plants in office buildings' was interesting. How the plants improve the quality of the air as well as psychologically brightening up the vast, sterile open areas in many large buildings. Colin said that the exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide is a factor in improving the health and output of the staff.

One plant he mentioned was the *Howea forsteriana* (Kentia palm) - endemic to Lord Howe island. Apparently this plant is particularly efficient in helping maintain a 'nice healthy indoor atmosphere in the office. Whilst growing to 5 to 15 metres in the ground, it is grown world-wide in commercial premises at much more modest heights!



Seen recently in a Ballarat hotel - several *Cyathea australis*, 1 to 2 metres tall, grown in large pots in an atrium. They had been there for two years and looked very happy. I did not see the gardener during my stay to enquire about 'care and maintenance'. Perhaps someone who lives in Ballarat may be able to discover the details. (The Ansonia Hotel, Lydiard Street). We had visited the same hotel in January when it must have been well over 40 degrees under the glass. Quite a change from June! (-4° at night)



members say:

When **Kris Schaffer** (*Neika, Tasmania*) wrote to me in July, her garden was under snow, including several tubs and pots. She is growing a most interesting variety of plants in containers - many Tasmanian endemics, including rare Alpine and Rainforest species. I am hoping that Kris will be writing an article for us about some of these. She lives 450m above sea level in the shadow of Mount Wellington, about twenty kilometres from Hobart. She writes "All container plants are moved around the house; very large pots of rainforest and alpine plants are placed in the shade during summer.

"My property is 8 acres, 4 of which are degraded pasture that I am regenerating. I have replaced sheep with geese; they help me keep the fuel load down in case of fire. They love monocots, so I grow these in pots. Plants like *Chaetospora sphaerocephala* (formerly *Gymnoschoenus sphaerocephala*), when in flower, need placing on the decking away from the geese." -Sounds fun Kris.

Cherree Densley writes from *Killarney, near Warrnambool, Victoria*. She grows a wide variety of plants in containers. She uses them as a feature within the rest of the garden. Cherree writes "I have found that it is essential to have pot plants within reach of a hose! One always thinks 'oh well, I'll be able to water these by carrying a bucket, or the sprinkler will reach this' - but in reality, one forgets to water regularly unless the containers are grouped and the hose reaches comfortably." (*Oh yes, Cherree, I'm sure we all agree with you!*)

"I do have a group of rock orchids which are in an assortment of containers and a hollow log beneath a tree in the lower garden, and these are NEVER watered. They survive very well on rain and in the shade of the tree. They probably don't flower as well but they look great.

Pruning is essential for most container plants; this promotes flowering and keeps the plant bushy and looking attractive."

Lorna George writes from *Glenn Valley, NSW*. She is a member of the Central Coast Group of the Australian Plants Society (previously SGAP NSW). This Group has a Special Interest group with 15-20 members who meet about three times a year to exchange information and ideas about container plants. I do hope we shall hear more about this group and some of their activities.

Morton Kavcney writes from *Rosebank, NSW*, about 30km inland from *Byron Bay*, - subtropical climate. I guess. He grows many rainforest species in containers. He is hoping to experiment with some of the small Acacias - *A. amblygona*, *A. longipedunculata*, and *A. bauerii*, indigenous to his area. I hope you will let us know how you get on, Morton.

Its great to hear from you all - Cheers 'til next time.



Pat

reference material:

Encyclopaedia of Australian Plants - Elliot and Jones

Australian plants for small gardens and containers - Gwen Elliot

and articles which may be of interest:

Australian Plants refer to Vol 19 no 154, page 260, for lovely pictures of *Swainsonia formosa* (Sturt's desert pea) - grown in hanging baskets.

A.P. (same issue) page 280 for Peg McAllister of Melbourne who grows the dainty little *Brunonia australis* in a tub.

A.P. (same issue) page 286 for comments by Bill Payne on the "Potted flower market".

DO YOU KNOW any other SGAP or APS member who
might be interested in joining the Study Group?
Please pass on membership information to them.

FEES for the Australian Plants in Containers Study Group are
\$8 per annum, due July 1998

CLOSING DATE for letters/articles for the next Newsletter is
1 December 1998