



**AUSTRALIAN PLANTS FOR
CONTAINERS STUDY GROUP**

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Leaders' Comments:

Welcome to the reactivated Australian Plants for Containers Study Group and our first newsletter as new leaders. First, we would like to thank Georgie Waters for designing a logo for us which will symbolize our new look. We know that many of you have native plants in containers for all sorts of reasons and therefore have long experience with what works. We hope that this newsletter will provide a forum for us all to discuss successes and failures and to share stories of plants. Given that more people are living in apartments and smaller units where their growing space is limited, container plants are really their best option. We want to be a source of information and inspiration for those people. This newsletter will be an electronic one which will have photos as well as descriptions. Please discuss your experiences with container plants with us and send in a photo or two and some text or a longer exposition.

WHY DO WE GROW AUSTRALIAN NATIVES IN POTS?

Below are our thoughts on reasons why. Feel free to suggest other reasons and send us your examples, thoughts and pictures. We want to start a conversation.

For beauty:

Everyone gasps when they see Qualup Bell in full bloom. The colour and shape of the flowers is unusual, lime green bells, sometimes with very dark red sepals. The birds love these flowers and visit them regularly, standing on tiptoe to drink nectar.



Pimelia physodes in a pot at the Walcott house



Flowers from a different cultivar in a pot at the Australian National Botanic Gardens,

For food:

Australian citrus fruits make great marmalade, very tangy and unusual. They are also attractive accents to salads and drinks. These plants are very pleasing in a decorative pot as the fruits are colourful and long lasting.



Left: Citrus hybrid 'Sunrise Line' plant and top middle, the fruit which has a sweet rind and tart flesh
Right: Citrus 'Rainforest Pearl' plant and bottom middle, the fruit.

Because they don't like our soils:

In Canberra we have clay soils. While clay soils are nutritious, they do not drain well, and many plants, including Western Australian banksias, do not appreciate wet feet. We grow these marvellous plants in a mix of 2/3 native potting mix and 1/3 sand to have beautiful flowers all through winter and food for the birds.



Summer location of some of our pots including banksias *Banksia victoriae*

Banksia oreophila

Because they don't like our climate:

Eremophila flaccida is a glorious plant, but it does not like our winter frost in Canberra. We have tried protecting it indoors, but it still sulks. *Corymbia* 'Summer Red' is another plant that does better in a pot in Canberra



Corymbia 'Summer Red' (photo by Rowan Ward)



Eremophila flaccida flower.

Because we need flowers in our border:

You can spice up your border instantly with the addition of plants in pots. When they stop flowering, you can remove them from the border until they bloom again next year.

Because the plant grows better in a pot:

We have tried *Correa* 'Canberra Bells' in the garden, but it does much better in a pot. The drainage is better, the soil is lighter, and it blooms extravagantly. This plant can have over 100 blooms at one time.



For outdoor decoration:

The clear blues, reds and golds of *Lechenaultia* are colours that are hard to find in other plants. *Lechenaultia* grows well in pots in parts of Australia where it will not thrive in the ground.



Left: *Lechenaultia* 'Eldorado'

Right: *Lechenaultia biloba*



For indoor decoration:

Palms will not grow in our frosty climate (except for the wonderful *Livistona australis*) but will do well in pots. They are traditionally decorative indoors where they thrive without too much light. The Kentia Palm from Lord Howe Island, *Howea forsteriana*, is a worldwide favourite indoor plant.



To make a statement:

You cannot make a more Australian statement than a Wollemi Pine in a pot at your front door. Many of our members will be lucky enough to be able to grow this magnificent plant well in their gardens, but for us, they grow best in a large container. *Rhodanthe anthemoides* also makes an excellent pot plant.



For rare and special plants:

We love the contrast between the orange flowers and grey foliage of *Diplolaena grandiflora* and this plant blooms for a long time over winter. Native orchids of all kinds do well in pots



Sarcochilus hybrid (native orchid)



Diplolaena grandiflora

For annuals:

Ptilotus do not last more than a year in our garden, but *Ptilotus* 'Joey' makes a terrific annual in a pot, compact, floriferous and showy.



For scent:

Boronia is a must near the front or back door, so that every time you go out you can catch the glorious scent (for the 75% of people who can smell Boronia). Prostanthera, and other plants with strongly scented leaves, are also great to have by the door, so that you can brush past them or trail your hand through the foliage.



Boronia megastima (photo by Geoff Lay)

For serenity:

Maidenhair Fern, in all its forms, Common (*Adiantum aethiopicum*), Giant (*Adiantum formosum*), and Rough (*Adiantum hispidulum*), grow well in containers. Their bright green lacy fronds and arching habit are pleasing and calming to the eye.



For propagation:

All native plants that are propagated by cuttings or seed start off in pots. Often they will be moved from smaller to larger pots as they grow before they are sold.



Plant arranged in pots for an ANPS Canberra sale (photo by Lucinda Royston)

WHAT SORT OF CONTAINERS DO YOU USE?

Plastic:

Plastic containers are light, easy to move, and retain water in dry climates. They can retain too much water in wetter climates and the plants can rot. Some plastic containers that we now use are grooved at the base for good drainage and get rid of the need for feet. The best feet are those triangular ones that are flat. These do not break as the ceramic raised ones do.



In the left picture, the two pots in the back are plastic that have grooved bases. The left one is in a tray which is kept full of water as this *Boronia* likes to be wet. In the right picture, a *Banksia grandis* (dwarf form) is growing in a large plastic pot which is raised on feet.

Ceramic:

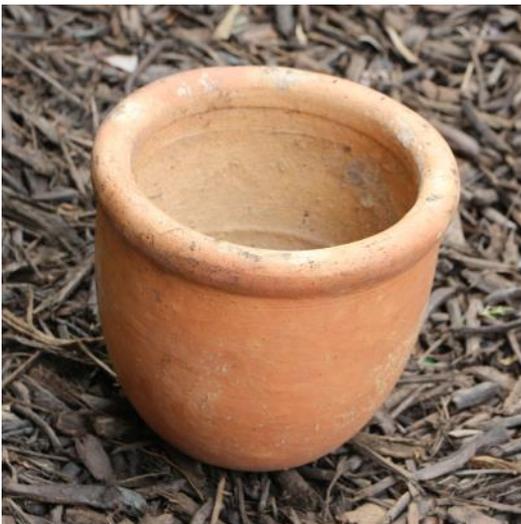
Ceramic pots come in a dizzying array of colours and designs (see left photo above in the foreground). They can really make an artistic statement massed together. The stunning garden, Majorelle, in Marrakesh, Morocco, has two or three differently coloured pots throughout the whole garden as a striking theme. Pipes can also make useful containers as you can see below. Here a *Banksia baxteri* is in a large ceramic 'tube' planted in the ground.



Left: a *Banksia baxteri* at the ANBG in a 'pipe' and right: *Banksia serrata* as bonsai at the National Arboretum

Clay or terracotta:

Clay pots are traditional and can be very decorative. They transpire water through the clay so that they dry out relatively quickly. This feature can be both an advantage and disadvantage, depending on the conditions. Some believe that it keeps the roots cooler in the hot days of summer.



Plain terracotta pot on the left and a terracotta trough on the right with ferns. Both types require feet to lift them off the ground for drainage.

Metal:

Metal pots can be very functional and some are extremely beautiful, for example bright brass pots.



Left: Metal pot on wheels at the National Arboretum with native plants. Right: Moroccan brass pot



Wooden:

Barrels can make very successful display pots, especially when massed with colourful plants.



Container Shapes

The very worst sort of container is one that narrows or pinches to the neck. These pots should be discouraged from the market as often you cannot repot without breaking the container. It can sometimes be the best of both worlds to enclose a plastic pot in a decorative ceramic pot. This arrangement allows repotting with ease and makes moving pots a less difficult task.



A variety of pots in Andy and Janet Russell's balcony garden.

Potting up:

We do not plant in a small container if the plant is eventually going to be large. You can plant a small plant in a large container and let it grow to fill the pot. This means that you do not have to disturb the plant by potting up to the next sized pot every few years. Of course, you can pot up regularly if it suits you better, but it involves more work for you and more disturbance to the plant.

What soil mix do you use in your pots?

We use a mixture of roughly 1/3 coarse landscape sand and 2/3 native potting mix. The potting mix (a local brand from Martins in Yass) consists of composted organic material with added water crystals and native fertilizer. The proportion of sand to potting mix will vary with the plant type, with those that need really good drainage getting more sand.

What mulch do you use on your pots, if any?

For most of our pots, we use a pebble mulch but on some of the bigger pots we use an organic mulch which consists of shredded and composted plant material from the local tip. We believe that mulch not only suppresses weeds but also conserves water.

Watering:

If you have a plant that needs more water than most others you can put a dish underneath the plant and keep that full of water. We have found this useful for *Boronia heterophylla*, which seems to be more thirsty than our other boronias. In summer you have to be prepared to water every day. In winter watering every fortnight can often be enough.

Fertilizing:

We fertilize very sparingly with only a light scattering of granules, as we want more flowers and not so much foliage. We use a granular native fertilizer (N 9.2, Phos 2.2, K 5.8, S 13.8, Ca 4.5) spring and autumn.

Pruning:

Regular pruning of your plants in pots can result in healthier plants and more pleasing shapes. At the end of summer we prune all our plants in containers ready for winter.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM OTHERS:

Some thoughts on aesthetics and care of *Pterostylis curta* (Blunt Greenhood) in a large, glazed bonsai pot

Fran Middleton, Canberra

I was given some sprouting *Pterostylis curta* tubers some years ago by a local ANPSC member and they have since been multiplying so much that I regularly divide them, pot them up (Martin's Native Potting Mix) and give some away. A couple of years ago I was also given a 40cm oval, 10cm deep, green-glazed bonsai pot and that colour seemed to call for these lovely green-flowered orchids as an aesthetically pleasing combo. On the principle that 'the shallower the pot the more moisture the medium retains' I did have some doubt that these little tubers would like this environment as the most shallow pot I had previously tried was 18cm.

I'm very happy with this, their second Spring flowering and the pot is now so crammed that division will have to be done when dormant next summer. Each year, when the flowers and foliage have died down I hide the pot away and do not water until autumn (other than what falls out of the sky). In the very harsh winter of 2018 in Canberra the foliage did suffer some damage but as I was away I couldn't be sure if it was frost damage or over-watering. So, this year I left the pot under cover of a polycarbonate pergola roof, watered weekly and towards the end of August when flowers were opening, brought it out to be admired on an outdoor table.

Observing colonies of these terrestrial orchids in nature on ANPSC Wednesday Walks and Field Trips, I can't say that frost damage has been a factor so next winter I'm planning to leave the pot out and see what happens. Easy-care, multiplies readily, subtle beauty - such a rewarding little plant!



Pterostylis curta growing in a shallow pot. Photo by Fran Middleton



Anigozanthus 'Bush Pearl' in pots along an edge at the Walcott's house

Please send us your thoughts comments and ideas and when we get enough, we will produce another Newsletter.

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