

ASSOCIATION OF SOCIETIES FOR GROWING AUSTRALIAN PLANTS

## VERTICORDIA STUDY GROUP

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### HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT VERTICORDIA REFERENCES

Alex. George, W.A. Botanist and author, and first editor of the new Flora of Australia, and currently visiting the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew as Australian Botanical Liaison Officer, has sighted some previously unpublished 1889 Post Office telegram letters by Baron Ferdinand von Mueller, which made special references to *Verticordia oculata* and *Verticordia grandis*.

Realising their historical value and interest to our Study Group members he went to the trouble of photocopying the sections in question and sending them back to Elizabeth George, author of *Verticordia*, Turner of Hearts.

Elizabeth comments:- "I found it fascinating that Mueller went to so much trouble to try to get them established at Kew, but then he did call *Verticordia oculata* the 'Princess of Australian Flowers' and could hardly drag himself away from the plants when he saw them in flower. He must have seen them as I did once, draped on the sand like beautiful shawls- just unbelievable. They were on the edge of a slight yellow sand embankment- at least a dozen plants in all."

Quoting from the *Verticordia* Book, "Mueller was appointed Government Botanist at Melbourne Botanic Gardens in 1853 and was widely regarded as the most assiduous botanical explorer in Australian history. He travelled south to King George Sound in 1867 and north to Freycinet Harbour near Shark Bay in 1877". His notes containing *Verticordia* references were as follows:-

First Page. "*From the enclosed telegram you will perceive, dear Mr. Dyer that an effort is made to get Vert. oculata and Vert. grandis into the conservatories at Kew. If I succeed in this, I shall regard it as the greatest triumph gained by me in ornamental culture! It is not an exaggeration to say, that I have written at least 100 letters to W.A. purposely during the last thirty years to accomplish this!*

Side note. *Perhaps after all the people did not get hold of the right kinds of Verticordias. I like to keep the experiment in my own hands."*

Second Page "*the sand plain south of the Geraldine mine is not easily reached when I was there myself in November 1877 the heat was already so scorching it was hopeless to carry living plants for a long distance on a pack horse were procured over and over again, but these kinds of myrtaceous p' are obstinate in yielding seedlings. I have telegraphed to the Res<sup>t</sup> N. Gibson, K. G. Sound ———.*

Side note. *These very local Verticordias will be as sheep- depasturing will now be swept out of ex'*

Third Page "*To see the case with plants kindly on Steamer, and to ask the captain to be so friendly as .*

*special care, you might give the man a trifle, who will water and shade the plants during the voyage, and who will bring them to Kew, should they not have perished on the way. In the latter case we must renew the experiment in the next cool season. I export cuttings of these rare and unsurpassingly beautiful Verticordias, and might try to get some"——*

Fourth page "*——arrival to you wrapped up in moist moss and tin sheet. Look at your specimens in the Kew herbarium ! If once you have the plants, they could be multiplied from cuttings with bottom warmth under a bell-glass. I shall send you new ferns from the (?) Lo—— also a Schoenus calostachys Benth. from there, which must be kept in that genus though the pistil is somewhat articulated. I refrain from describing it here as it may be the Malacon species noted in the gen plantarum. If however new, it might reserve Sir Will MacGregor's name from Mr. Clark and myself.*

Side note. *Always respectfully yours. Ferd. von Mueller"*

Fifth page. "*Geraldton W.A.  
Baron Von Mueller  
Govt. Botanist*

*Several splendid healthy Verticordia plants will be forwarded tomorrow to Government Resident Albany to await your disposal. They are of the Cream Coloured variety from near Geraldine Murchison.*

*Signed Maitland Brown  
Government Resident.*

*It is with much regret Dear Mr. Dyers that I learned of the failing of the first attempts, to introduce the two splendid Verticordias. They moreover arrived there in winter, and must have suffered from frost, being subtropic plants. They were to have been shipped several months earlier, but delays arose in finding out the precise localities.*

*——through depasturing and burning off of the scrub such plants have become very scarce in their native haunts. What I now shall do, is to recommence at once operations in W.A. so that the plants become better established, earlier sent in the season and are more carefully attended to during the voyage. But I would beg of you particularly, to leave this introduction in my hands If you write——"*

#### CULTIVATION NOTES AND MEMBER REPORTS

The current and persistent drought situation over virtually all of Australia continues to 'dampen' the enthusiasm of not only our Study Group members but of gardeners generally. Our sympathy goes out particularly to Native Plant nurserymen, with general watering restrictions seriously affecting their trading.

In my own area the only really worthwhile rain for 2006 occurred in September, and this fortunately at a preflowering period resulting in a very good early spring Verticordia display, rivalling 2005, reported previously. Light or minimal rain

which occurred on several other occasions over the year seemed to do more harm than good in that it was insufficient to wet the sub-strata.

The planting method I have been using since 2002, (detailed in previous newsletters), has not generally required any hand watering after initial plant establishment. In my last newsletter I discussed several plant losses and proposed reasons for same. Since then a few *Verticordia* losses have occurred but these have been of plants established before the current planting method was started. These losses include several *V. plumosa* and *V. attenuata*.

Another effect of the drought however regards flowering. *V. plumosa* for instance has either failed to flower or flowering has been very poor. Several other species have flowered much later than their expected period.

A species which has performed particularly well however is *V. galeata*. I grew it originally as a grafted specimen but five grown from 2002, on their own roots and with the new planting treatment have far surpassed the earlier grafted effort in tenacity, robust growth and flowering.

Ted Newman, Dural NSW; close to my own area, reports that although his garden is generally showing the effects of the prolonged drought, *verticordias* in the main are standing up to the conditions better than most other plants.

Bob O'Neill, Katandra Gardens, Wandin Victoria, reported, (1/07),:- "The *verticordias* are putting on a great show at the moment so I felt that now is the time to tell you how things are shaping up.

We have the following species in our collection, all growing in the drier section of the garden in our reddish, well drained soil

*V. plumosa*

*V. mitchelliana*

*V. monadelpha* var. *monadelpha*, white and pink forms

*V. monadelpha* var. *callitricha*

*V. staminosa*

*V. Venus Princess*

*V. drummondii*

*V. densiflora*

I have been reasonably successful recently at taking cuttings so will extend beyond the 20 or so plants currently in the garden. As cuttings come to hand I will experiment with different situations in the garden to see how they cope. All plants are well mulched and in sunny positions.

For the first time here, we are now being treated to an extended dry spell, I cannot call it drought yet. Last year rainfall was normal for the first half year, then the taps were half turned off.

60 mm near Xmas took off a lot of pressure, but since then we have had 3mm for the first half of January. Level 3 water restrictions are now in place, which had to happen, and we can handle well enough, but I feel that level 4 may well be around the corner unless some good rains fall in Melbourne's catchments soon, and that will mean no mains water for the garden at all. Our dam is very low but hopefully will last out till the end of summer and we have a 10000 gallon tank  $\frac{3}{4}$  full, so that will soften the problems a little----

John Edmonds-Wilson, Coonalpyn, South Australia, reported (9/06):- "Just a quick update of what's happening at Coonalpyn. We are in the midst of the worst season here on record. All annual pastures have browned out and are dead. Crops are stressed but still alive. Rainfall is way down but we received 7mm yesterday which was our biggest rainfall event since the first week in May. Total rainfall for August was 5mm.

Because of the lack of rain we have been receiving far heavier frosts than normal, down to almost -4 degrees. Verticordias are holding up very well with the exception of *V. chrysostachys* var *chrysostachys* which has been reduced in size by 80%. No deaths at all though. I have watered once, (at the end of August) because when *Grevillea eriostachia* dies from being too dry, you know things are dry.

An example of the severity of the frosts is when *Chamaelaucium uncinatum* (2m x 3m) is killed by same."

In a later telephone conversation with John I referred to his seedlings of *Verticordia picta* he succeeded in raising last Autumn. He said they were still progressing satisfactorily.

Graham Eastwood, Batemans Bay, NSW, has sent me several reports. On (9/06) he said he had scattered seeds of various species before Autumn in many different spots in his garden, but none have come up.

A number of seedlings have appeared however from his *V. chrysanthellas* and *V. staminosa*. Unfortunately his *V. pennigera* has died but a nearby seedling about 100 x 70mm is developing flower buds. Also a seedling from the mother plant has shown up since the end of August. He said his other Verticordias are looking well.

In a report at the end of (10/06) Graham says since September the drought is starting to affect his garden which was then looking bone dry and some Verticordias, particularly *V. plumosa* have flowered sparsely or for a short time only. The self sown *V. pennigera* has progressed further to 120 x 80mm and flowering all over. The flowers were white at first, then to cream and finally turned dark red, suggesting it had hybridised.

His *V. mitchelliana* was then 520 x 400mm, and was a 'glory' with flower cover all over.

In another report at Xmas time he again referred to *V. plumosa* which had produced very few flowers. A second specimen had plenty of flowers but had then suffered heavy die-back to 7/8. He pruned it severely and new growth showed.

*V. helichrysanha* had only a few flowers

*V. densiflora* var. *cespitosa* had gone into dormancy for 12 months but is now healthier with new growth showing, but he says it will not flower.

*V. fastigiata* currently has a million red flowers

*V. minutiflora* and two selfsown ones nearby are starting to flower.

## SEED PROPAGATION AT CHERRYBROOK

Being impressed with John Edmonds-Wilson's efforts at seed propagation described in NL 45. I decided 12 months ago to try to emulate his success. I was

particularly interested in *V. picta* because I had not been able to obtain suitable cutting material in recent years. This species moreover is traditionally difficult to strike from cutting, although in earlier years I had achieved a little success.

Accordingly I purchased seed of same from Nindethana Seed Service. And followed as closely as I could John's methods including dry stratification of the seed from February till April before smoke treatment and then subsequent but sparing hand watering.

Our winter turned out exceptionally dry however and unlike with John there was no early seed germination. I referred above to our good spring rain in September 2006 with approximately a week of mild humid weather. By this time I had given up on my *V. picta* seeds but was surprised when I found some germination starting to show out.. A total of about 11 or 12 appeared in about three weeks, I potted up 6 of the more advanced ones, but the balance were hit by several months of totally dry spring conditions and although watered occasionally, seem not to have survived. Five of the potted ones are progressing slowly but one pot was knocked over and objected to the treatment.

Several other species of verticordia have failed to respond but I have left the seeds in situ in case they think better of it in the course of time or under better winter humidity conditions.

I suspect that the loss of the unpotted smaller seedlings could be attributed to the germination occurring so late in the growing season and possibly also to the exposed, rather hot situation in which they had been placed.

#### PLANT NUTRITION

The following has been reproduced from Vol 45, No 1 of SGAP Qld. Regional Bulletin. The important elements of plant nutrition are:-

**Nitrogen :** Promotes stem and leaf development.

**Phosphorus :** Essential for all division developing, promotes a sound root system, Stimulates flower seed and root development

**Potash :** Necessary for manufacture of starches and sugars, hastens maturity. Required for fruit development and assists plants in overcoming insect and fungus attack

**Calcium** Necessary for root development, strengthens cell walls, needed for the formation of proteins

Materials used for surface mulching that are not fully composted will cause nitrogen and magnesium deficiencies. With nitrogen deficiency the older leaves turn yellow and cling to the plant. To overcome this problem apply sulphate of ammonia at a rate of 230 grams per square metre

#### MEMBERSHIP

I am very pleased to acknowledge donations of \$10 from Queensland and New South Wales Regions to our Study Group.

If a cross appears here  I have yet to receive your \$5 subscription for the current financial period 06/07, due 1/7/06.

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