

Acacias

Report on July Meeting by John Knight

A good roll up of members, along with a couple of visitors, filled the meeting room at Eurobodalla Regional Botanic Gardens to discuss the role of Acacias in our gardens. With up to 1000 species occurring naturally in Australia, the Acacias or Wattles comprise the largest genus of all Australian plants. Ranging from low spreading ground covers to tall forest trees, Acacias are found in high rainfall areas and arid inland deserts. Their range is the broadest of all our woody plants, and their diversity of form, flowering time, and tolerance of garden conditions suggests that these hardy plants should find a home in every garden.

Botanists have suggested that Acacia evolved prior to the separation of Gondwana. It is believed that the plants which gave rise to those found in Australia originated in the tropical areas of Africa and South America. The subgenera of Acacia and Aculeiferum from these areas were also found in the area now known as India and prior to its separation from Northern Australia these two subgenera were evolving into the subgenus Phyllodinaea, which were dispersing into northern Australia, along with a few early species of the subgenus Acacia, taking advantage of the drier areas which existed between the widespread rainforest.

Following separation of Gondwana and the southern drift of the Australian continent, the dry areas expanded, enabling these early Acacia's to diversify and spread into the developing woodlands and semi-arid areas.

L. Pedley Assistant Director of Queensland herbarium (retired in 1988) has suggested that the phyllodinous species evolved around the time of Gondwanan separation, and the pinnate species evolved from these.

Other botanists argue for different evolution processes, but in any case Acacias are believed to have been part of the Australian flora since the beginning of the Tertiary period some 65 million years ago.



Acacia elongata is a feature in damper sites, and is easily grown in home gardens. Pruning early can keep the plant manageable. The sweetly perfumed flowers are out now, and attract many beneficial insects, and birds looking for a feed as well.

Those attending were first introduced to the groups into which the Acacias are divided to assist with identification. A simple **Key to the Acacias of South East NSW**, as illustrated here was used to help.

Mature leaves bipinnate Group E Bipinnate Group

Plants in this group include

Acacia blayana *Acacia dealbata* *Acacia decurrens*
Acacia filicifolia *Acacia irrorata* *Acacia mearnsii*
Acacia nano-dealbata *Acacia olsenii*
Acacia parramattaensis *Acacia sylvestris*
Acacia terminalis *Acacia trachyphloia*

The features identifying each species was illustrated, the information then being used during a later walk around the Gardens to re-inforce the newly acquired knowledge.

Some plants which are widely cultivated, but not local to the South East include:

Acacia baileyana *Acacia cardiophylla* *Acacia elata* *Acacia spectabilis*



Group E
eg *Acacia terminalis*

Mature leaves reduced to phyllodes

Phyllodes with 2 or more longitudinal veins

Flowers in spikes Group A Juliflorae Group (Juliflora = flowers in catkins)

Plants in this group include

Acacia binervia *Acacia floribunda* *Acacia georgensis* *Acacia longifolia* *Acacia longissima*
Acacia maidenii *Acacia mucronata* *Acacia obtusifolia*



Group A **eg *Acacia longifolia***

Phyllodes penniveined (i.e. feather like, more than 1 main vein, and minor veins)

Flowers in capitate heads
Phyllodes flat, or \pm terete not pungent pointed

**Group B Pluriveined
Group**

Note that all the species in this group locally have anastomosing veins, that is the main veins are connected by many smaller veins

Plants in this group include

Acacia binervata *Acacia cognata* *Acacia elongata*
Acacia implexa *Acacia melanoxydon* *Acacia subporosa*

and the widely grown *Acacia howittii*

Group B
eg Acacia melanoxydon



Phyllodes \pm terete or tetragonous, pungent pointed

Group C Phyllodineae , section ulicifolia

Acacia aculeatissima
Acacia brownii
Acacia genistifolia
Acacia ulicifolia

Group C
eg Acacia brownii



**Phyllodes with 1 main vein, occasionally more, then obviously penniveined but not reticulate or anastomosing
Flowers in capitate heads on simple peduncles**

Group D Phyllodineae Group

This includes the largest group of local wattles

Acacia covenyi *Acacia falcata* *Acacia falciformis*
Acacia hamiltoniana *Acacia kybeanensis* *Acacia*
kydrensis *Acacia lucasii* *Acacia mabellae* *Acacia*
myrtifolia *Acacia obliquinervia* *Acacia*
paradoxa *Acacia penninervis* *Acacia rubida* *Acacia*
stricta *Acacia suaveolens* *Acacia vernicuflua*



Other Acacias which are widely cultivated, but not local to the South East include:

Acacia acinacea *Acacia boormanii* *Acacia cultriformis* *Group D eg Acacia stricta*
Acacia fimbriata *Acacia leprosa* *Acacia linifolia*
Acacia podalyriifolia *Acacia pravissima* *Acacia prominens*
Acacia pycnantha *Acacia retinodes* *Acacia saligna* and *Acacia vestita*



***Acacia floribunda*, this form with weeping foliage, makes a pleasant tree for gardens,**

whilst *Acacia covenyi* is a larger shrub, needing a bit of room to accommodate it.



Many Acacias have been cultivated in the past, but seemingly fewer and fewer these days. This may be due to the fact that many are quick growing pioneer species, which become woody and untidy. Also the widely held belief that most are short lived. However, at the meeting, quite a range of plants were brought along for the display table, and the growers were enthusiastic about their value as garden plants.

There is a number of newer collections becoming available, and reputedly more suitable for modern, smaller gardens.



In particular forms of *Acacia cognata* seem to have gained popular acceptance. Above, the typical open, weeping habit of local bush plants, and to the right, above *A. cognata* “Mini Cog” and below, *A. cognata* “Green Mist”, both now widely grown, although I prefer the open tree form myself.



Prostrate forms of larger shrubs, such as *Acacia baileyana*, *Acacia iteaphylla*, *Acacia pravissima*, and as shown below, *Acacia cultriformis* have widely grown.



For sheer brilliance of flowering, one can't beat *Acacia acinacea*. Gold dust Wattle. This taller form is growing near Bendigo in Victoria. There is a range of lower growing forms ideal for well drained sunny gardens, and growing about 50cm high with a spread of 1m. Pruning after flowering is recommended to keep the plants vigorous.



Oddities, such as this red flowered form of *Acacia leprosa* “Scarlet Blaze” are found from time to time. As yet this form has proved difficult in cultivation, but many are trying to find the key to its survival.

Similarly there is a very fine, pink flowered form of *Acacia terminalis* which occurs in Tasmania. It will be a stunning garden plant if its propagation is successful.



Amongst my favourite wattles is *Acacia spectabilis*, Mudgee Wattle. This photo is of a plant growing along the Darling River near Louth, western NSW, from which I collected a few seeds. One is now in the garden at Batemans Bay, and just about to burst into flower.

References;

Acacias of South East Australia, Terry Tame 1992

Acacias of New South Wales, Inez Armitage 1993

Encyclopaedia of Australian Plants suitable for cultivation, Vol 2
W. Rodger Elliot and David L. Jones 1982