CREATING A FLOURISHING, SHADY GARDEN WITHOUT BIG WATER BILLS

Extract from "News of the North" Gardening Section - "The West Australian", 29 April, 1982.

When Forests Department extension officer Wally Edgecombe came to live in Karratha 18 months ago he was used to the sight of tall, green trees such as those found in the south-west corner of the State.

To make matters worse he moved into a new house with a bare yard in which the earth, like that on any construction site, had been packed down hard by men and machines while the house was being built.

Yet there is now a flourishing garden with shady trees more than two metres high, usable areas of lawn front and back, flowering shrubs and creepers - and no big water bills.

As a forestry officer, one of Mr Edgecombe's tasks in the Pilbara is to evaluate various dry-climate trees and plants for use in Pilbara gardens. The propagation and testing is mostly done at the government nursery in the light industrial area. But Mr Edgecombe also takes his work home.

Most of his garden was planned when he arrived. His task was the establishment and monitoring of what is one of five "low-water-gardens" sponsored by the State Government in Karratha to develop ways of reducing demand on the West Pilbara water scheme.

Mr Edgecombe has not one but three water meters - one on the main, one at the front garden tap and one on the tap in the back garden. By comparing the readings he has found that he can maintain a flourishing garden using only 550 kilolitres a year, just over one-third of the average Pilbara household consumption.

He also knows that showers, toilets, washing machine and other domestic use only accounts for one-third of the total. What is even better is that with the stepped pricing system for water, he can stay out of the more expensive bracket. His last water bill was only $20. "If you stay in the shower for two minutes or five minutes it doesn't make much difference", he said. "Two-thirds of the water, at least in this house, goes on the garden but people in company houses use up to 85 per cent. With the company home-ownership plan, people are going to start noticing this when they have to start paying for their water".

Trees which have shown promise either in his garden or in department trials include Eucalpyptus torquata, Eucalyptus coolibah, Eucalyptus striaticalyx, Eucalyptus leucophloia (snappy gum), the weeping variety of Acacia coriacea (a local wattle), Acacia aneura and Thespesia populnea.

Suitable large shrubs include Acacia aneura, Acacia tumida, Acacia holorsericea, Acacia trachycarpa and Claradendron tomentosa, Eremophylla longifolia and Pittosporum phyllyraeoides.

Smaller shrubs include Acacia translucens (poverty bush), and Eremophila maculata, while ground covers like Ipomoea costata, Ipomoea braziliensis (beach morning glory) and Canavalia rosea prosper with a minimum of water.

Mr Edgecombe said that most of the species were found locally and were well adapted to the climate. They could be grown into much more attractive plants with proper soil preparation and care.

"A native garden is not a low-maintenance garden", he said. "It helps to prune native trees and shrubs to get the best foliage growth and you have to keep things like buffel grass out. Low water doesn't mean low maintenance except that once the trees are established the buffel grass is easily controlled with weedicide and the couch grass from your neighbour's lawn finds it better to stay at home".