



# MARRI *for* MONEY



*Marri or W.A. redgum (Eucalyptus calophylla) has had mixed fortunes. Revered by botanists - calophylla means "beautiful leaves" - a century ago it was only considered useful as a shade tree, while jarrah and karri were financing the development of the colony. Now, marri is a major export earner, and is emerging as having potential for making fine furniture.*




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Story and photos by Cliff Winfield

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**S**PECIMENS of marri were first collected in 1801 by Robert Brown, the botanist on Matthew Flinders' voyage around Australia, on the shores of Princess Royal Harbour (later Albany). Marri is one of the most widely distributed South-West eucalypts. It grows naturally from Walkaway in the Murchison to Cape Leeuwin in the South-West; to Cape Riche 80 km east of Albany, and inland beyond Narrogin.

It grows on a range of soil types, including the gravelly loams in the valleys of the Darling Plateau, between jarrah covered laterite ridges. Here, marri was considered by early settlers to be an indicator of good agricultural soil, so, outside State forest or national parks, most higher rainfall marri country has been cleared and cultivated.

The marri tree has an astonishing variety of forms. On the limestone heath between Cape Naturaliste and Cape Leeuwin and on coastal granites it is a gnarled bonsai-like shrub sometimes less than a metre high. On the eastern side of the Darling Plateau on the edge of the Wheatbelt it is a perfectly shaped tree around 15 metres tall, with a straight bole, spreading limbs and a dense canopy. In karri forest it grows up to 60 metres tall and has a sparse crown.

Pink flowered varieties are usually grown in parks and gardens, but in the wild marri is noted for its prolific creamy-white blossom in midsummer (see *Landscape* Autumn 88). The quality and quantity of marri nectar makes it popular with apiarists.

Another distinguishing feature of marri is its seed capsules. "Honkey nuts" became famous in their own right when May Gibbs created the stories of the gumnut babies Snugglepot and Cuddlepie. The capsules hold the largest seeds of any eucalypt, sometimes over 2 cm long.

**B**ecause of the lack of demand for marri timber, many thousands of trees were left in South-West paddocks to provide shade for stock; now marri is about to come of age as a plantation timber tree. ▶

Once you've learnt to identify marri you quickly realise it is the most common roadside and farm tree of the South-West. In the early days of the timber industry, marri timber was never as easy to secure in sound pieces as jarrah or karri. As a result, thousands of big marris have been left in South-West paddocks for shade and shelter.

## BLOODWOODS

Marri is botanically grouped with the "bloodwoods" - some 50 or so eucalypt species mostly found in the tropical north of Australia. A few species occur down

the eastern coast, but not as far as Tasmania. There are three bloodwoods in south-western Australia, marri (*Eucalyptus calophylla*), mountain gum (*E. haematoxylon*) and red-flowering gum (*E. ficifolia*).

Bloodwoods are also found in the Pilbara, Kimberley and central desert. The name derives from the blood red "gum", or kino, that seeps through cracks in the tree's fibrous grey bark, possibly in response to fire, frost, drought, insect attack or storm damage. All eucalypts produce kino, but bloodwoods, and especially marri, have so much that







## MARRI MAN

When he emigrated from Yorkshire in 1969, David Gregg brought with him a European attitude to timber - a kind of reverence and appreciation that has developed in a part of the world where forests are scarce.

He was amazed at the local attitude to a graceful and aesthetic tree species - the redgum or marri. Since colonisation, abundant fine timber has always been cheaply available in Western Australia, so the less than perfect marri was considered inferior.

The Greggs managed, then bought, the fledgling Vasse Felix vineyard, and soon built it into a flourishing business. But if winemaking was his business, crafting marri became his pastime. David made his desk and lined his office with marri, and, when they became available, bought and stored marri beams, just as others buy and store wine. He dreamt of adding a second storey to the winery - a restaurant built from local stone and lined with yellow-grey marri timber panels, with a view over the vineyard to the marri studded horizon.

After 18 years of winemaking, foresight wasn't enough and there was pressure to get bigger or get out. Luckily the Greggs sold to someone with capital to develop and expand the vineyard, but without the expertise. They were invited to stay on, once again as managers but with the resources and capital to expand and build the restaurant.

Meanwhile, David developed an interest in the Shakers, a receding religious movement in Pennsylvania. His interest was not their celibate lifestyle, but the elegant simplicity of their housing and furniture, made from naturally finished timber and leather. With proceeds from the winery's sale, David set up a small sawmill and furniture factory. Like his wine, his high-backed marri and leather chairs won instant acclaim.

Knowing how hard it is to get good marri timber he established a marri nursery at Cowaramup to supply his new plantation.

David is extremely busy, but he'll always find time to talk to a fellow marri fan, so if you've got some stories to tell, or seed to sell, call in and see him.



pockets of "gum veins" interrupt the continuity of the wood fibre.

"Shakes", or large cracks, are common in the sawn timber of bloodwoods, and planks fall apart as they dry. This and the high incidence of gum gave marri its poor reputation as a timber species.

## TIMBER

For the first 140 years of timber-cutting in W.A. marri was considered more a nuisance than an asset. It had little commercial value and competed against the valuable jarrah and karri in the forest, particularly the forests near Manjimup. In a mixed karri/marri forest where only karri was felled, the open areas left in the forest were rapidly recolonised by the vigorous marri left behind.

The turning point came in the late 1960s when it became commercially viable to harvest marri as pulpwood. By 1976 an overseas export market for marri chips allowed forest managers to harvest marri and karri simultaneously and use regeneration techniques which allowed karri to re-establish quicker than marri. This ensured that the regrowth forests

were the same as the stand's composition before being cut.

When solid marri logs are milled, the timber is tough and strong, has a milky to golden hue which mellows to yellow/grey with age, and is easily worked, all desirable characteristics for fine timber. Foresters had promoted the qualities of sawn marri timber for decades, but were defeated by economics. More recently, improved sawmilling techniques and a revised royalty structure for sawlogs resulted in much higher recovery of sawn timber from marri logs.

Before long, crafters, conservationists, sawmillers and others also began to see the value of this fine timber resource. The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) therefore developed specifications for marri similar to those for karri and jarrah. Marri logs could be classified as first or second grade sawlog or chip log. Over 10 years only 1.6 per cent of felled marri was solid enough to be sold as sawlogs - compared to over 70 per cent of karri in 1988. There are many buyers for first grade marri sawlogs but not enough quality trees.

Over the years there has been little research aimed at improving the productivity of marri as a timber tree. However, there is a strong correlation between insect borer attack and kino formation, and borer activity has increased in recent below average rainfall years. Many large marri have sound wood in the centre but the outer wood is severely attacked. It is also known that better quality trees tend to grow in areas free from high intensity bushfires. Future research will clarify these aspects.

## NEW INTEREST

For many years foresters and others have harboured a latent interest in growing marri for use as fine timber. "Special" seed has been collected and this year at least one private plantation of marri, and several research plots, will be established.

By selecting seed from quality timber trees and genetically improving marri through a long term tree breeding program, along with careful site selection, preparation and special fire management, marri will emerge as another important plantation timber resource of W.A. □



Marri assumes many guises. Here, it grows as a stunted mallee on the heath near Cape Naturaliste. ▲

At the other extreme, marri adapts its form to compete for light with the much taller karri, growing as a tall, sparse forest tree. ►



# LANDSCOPE

VOLUME 4 NO 4 WINTER EDITION 1989



*Effluent disposal ponds from industry disfigure an idyllic strip of coastal land. But restoration work and a new conservation park are planned for the Leschenault Peninsula, near Bunbury. Turn to p.8.*



*Wood that was once only suitable for firewood can now be used to make high grade furniture. Find out how on p.24.*



*With spring approaching, the bush beckons...but without proper planning your walk could turn to disaster. See p.40.*



*A spectacular landscape, with an astounding array of plants and animals lies inland from Jurien Bay. Read about the Mt Lesueur area on p.28.*



*A population explosion of coral-eating snails threatens the unique reefs of Ningaloo Marine Park. How does CALM plan to counter their attack? See p.14.*

## COVER



*In W.A.'s far north, Aboriginal rangers with ties to land now in national parks draw on the traditional wisdom of their people for use in Park management. Photo-Robert Garvey*

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Advertising: Tim Langford-Smith ☎ (09) 389 8644 Fax: 389 8266

Acknowledgements: Cartoon-Louise Burch, Illustrations-Ian Dickinson

Coral illustration p 20 - (from an original illustration by Jeff Kelly)

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Urban Antics Road Sign-Courtesy of Perth City Council

Colour Separations by Gibbneys Graphics

Printed in Western Australia by Kaleidoscope

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Published by Dr S Shea, Executive Director,  
Department of Conservation and Land Management,  
50 Hayman Road, Como, Western Australia 6152.