



## TURNING A NEW LEAF EUCALYPTUS FOLIAGE FOR THE VASE

When we think of eucalypts, we usually imagine a fully grown tree, as majestic as the karri or as commercial as the bluegum. But eucalypts have another use. Their leaf shapes and colours have come increasingly to the attention of florists, who have found that the unusual foliage, as well as the flowers, buds and capsules, are becoming popular components of new-age floral art.

BY LIZ BARBOUR AND ALISON FUSS

**F**lorists the world over grew interested in eucalypt foliage when they were looking for leaves coloured grey, the most difficult tone to find in floral art. A number of eucalypts have grey in their leaves, especially in their juvenile form. The first grey eucalypts to be singled out as floral art material included such species as cider gum (*Eucalyptus gummi*) and silver-leafed mountain gum (*E. pulverulenta*), a group commonly referred to as 'dollar gums', originating from eastern Australia.

Their popularity grew to such a degree that growers in Europe and America cultivated 'dollar gums' themselves, reducing reliance on imports from Australia. To acclimatise eucalypts to these foreign habitats, a number of

different practices were introduced to improve the production of foliage. For example, the Europeans introduced the practice of keeping the eucalypt stem cut to less than 60 centimetres from the ground. As a result the shoots are easier to pick and the desirable grey-toned juvenile leaf form persists. Frost-tolerant lines have been identified, especially among cider gums, and in California, three cultivars (cultivated varieties) of silver-leafed mountain gum have been registered under the descriptive names of 'Blue Boy', 'True Blue' and 'Bonsai'. All these improvements on the 'dollar gums' have made it difficult for Australia to compete, especially now that eucalypts are so well entrenched overseas that some

countries have established special import restrictions that favour the development of their local industries.

The potential for our local eucalypts to add new foliage to the market was pointed out by the Israelis, who are using Western Australian species to rehabilitate their harsh arid lands. Not only do we have eucalypts with grey foliage, at times infused with pink, but the colouring extends to russet reds splashed onto the widest range of leaf shapes, both in the juvenile and mature form.

The features that distinguish our eucalypts are their buds, flowers and capsules, which come in a range of shapes and sizes. Flowers in particular add value. In Holland, the price for a stem of plain



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Flower arrangements using eucalyptus foliage with flowers from exotic plants provide an attractive display.

Arrangement – Susan Abbiss/La Plaza Florist  
Photo – Liz Barbour

**Left:** Mottlecah flower bud opening among the sought after 'ghost' foliage.  
Photo – Babs and Bert Wells/CALM

**Below:** Red flowering gum can be seen flowering during November and December in many Perth gardens and streets.

Photo – Jiri Lochman





foliage might be 35–40 Dutch cents (about 30 Australian cents), but for foliage with buds, flowers or capsules the price can triple, to more than a guilder. The new popularity of eucalypt flowers may assist us in holding market share. Although eucalypt species used in Europe for foliage have adapted to the cold conditions, the longer Australian day and our harsh, dry conditions are needed to optimise flowering. The result can be seen in, for example, the delightful fluted buds of the coral gum (*E. torquata*), the impressive red blooms of mottlecah (*E. macrocarpa*) and red flowering gum (*E. ficifolia*), and the unusual seed capsules of illyarie (*E. erythrocorys*). All are hardy species, and some of them have tolerance to drought and salt. Some even have a large mallee root to ensure that they can be hedge-grown, shooting plentifully and frequently.

### TAKING LEAVES TO MARKET

For a new species to become a commercial floral product, it has to pass a series of tests. Perhaps the most important criterion is that the customers must like it! Floral materials are fashionable, however, and fashions change, sometimes quickly. By continually testing a range of species, growers can keep a step ahead of these changes. Aileen Reid at the Western Australian Department of Agriculture has earmarked nearly 200 species that have potential for this market, and CALM is collecting seed for sale to its growers.

For every florist, the vase life of the product is all-important. Freshly harvested eucalypt foliage usually lasts between seven and 14 days in water, but the industry is keen to extend this, especially when distant markets are being pursued. One way to prolong the life of the immature foliage is to replace the vase water with a 'cocktail', a solution containing a food source such as sugar and other chemicals which kill bacteria. An alternative is to expose the shoots to low temperatures before dispatch. The addition of buds and flowers to the foliage complicates the issue, especially as they may drop off when stressed.

Also important is a healthy stem, with no disease or insect damage. Florists demand a perfect crop, which can be difficult to provide with native flora. Some eucalypts, such as cider gum, have natural



**Above:** Pink roses coupled with eucalyptus foliage make a simple but stunning display.

Arrangement – Betty Barbour.  
Photo – Peter Maloney

**Right:** Foliage of the white-leaved mallee (*E. albida*) ready for harvest.

Photo – Peter Maloney

**Below right:** A foliage crop of silver-leaved mountain gum—one of the most popular species with florists.

Photo – Peter Maloney



resistance to insects, but others need a carefully planned spray routine.

Market popularity must be matched by plant vigour; the species must be able to produce new shoots quickly and withstand continual cutting. There are times of the year when foliage cannot be harvested. In periods of rapid growth, the soft new tips wilt easily and shrivel on the way to market. These need to be left on the plant to harden for a few weeks before picking. In winter, growth is often slow and disease difficult to control. This makes it an ideal time to prune and prepare the trees for the next season's production. To cope with this seasonality, growers usually have a range of species that ensure a copious, year-round supply of foliage.

Eucalypts are a versatile crop. Modern techniques for drying and processing the foliage offer increased flexibility in marketing. Cut foliage no longer needs to be sent to market immediately after picking, but instead can be stored and



sold when demand is greatest. Europeans in particular appreciate the longevity, colours and textures which can be achieved. For example, dying foliage opens the door to a range of designer colours to complement any interior decor.

### REVAMPING THE MARKET

Australia's floral produce export market, including foliage, is large. In 1992–93 it was worth \$23 million, of



which Western Australia contributed 58 per cent. This is just a ripple in the \$34 billion world market, but its importance to the local economy is obvious. No doubt eucalypts will also find their place among the array of native flora success stories. Fresh foliage from Australia currently travels to many destinations, including the USA, Japan, Kuwait, and Switzerland.

Enthusiastic growers are already experimenting with new varieties, an interest which has prompted CALM to scrutinise its oil mallee trials and the Department of Agriculture to establish species trials, to bring new and improved forms of eucalypt into foliage production. Mark Dalton at the CALM Seed Centre in

Manjimup has collected seed from 60 of our local species with potential to produce attractive foliage, and is carrying a number of eastern Australian species recommended for growers. However, as seedling populations can be extremely variable, propagation by grafting, tissue culture and cutting techniques are being perfected (see 'The Western Blue Gums Are Coming!', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 1994-95). In this way, a constant supply of trendy foliage plants will be available to satisfy the market.

The advantage Western Australians have over the rest of the world is that we are growing a huge range of eucalypts right in our back yard. If we can capture

the imagination and creativity of florists the world over, sparking new trends, the popular eucalyptus foliage market can be ours to dominate.



**Above:** Apple box (*E. bridgesiana*) foliage with heart-shaped leaves.  
Photo - Peter Maloney

**Left:** Local grower Bob Harington at work on his four hectare eucalypt foliage farm. Bob has developed different species from the popular silver-leaved mountain gum and cider gum. All the new species have opposite leaves which are sessile (attached directly to the stem). Here, Bob is inspecting tallerack (*E. tetragona*).  
Photo - Peter Maloney

**Below far left:** The impressive blue-grey leaves of the mottlecah.  
Photo - Peter Maloney

**Below left:** Alpine cider gum (*E. archerii*).  
Photo - Peter Maloney



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The authors acknowledge the assistance of Aileen Reid of the Department of Agriculture.

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Flower arrangements featuring eucalyptus foliage are becoming popular with florists. Find out why on page 35.



Unseen for more than 100 years and believed to have been extinct, Gilbert's potoroo turned up quite unexpectedly. See page 28.



Salinity is a problem in the State's south-west, but farmers, communities and government agencies are working to find solutions. See page 39.



A giant dragonfly lives in the south-west of Western Australia. You can find out more about this ancient relict of the jarrah forest in 'Western Petalura' on page 52.



The thick-billed grasswren is one of several animals that may be reintroduced to Shark Bay as part of an ambitious project. See 'Return to Eden' on page 22.

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## COVER

The stunning royal robe (*Scaevola striata*) is one of a host of fabulous fanflowers found in Western Australia. Suzanne Curry discusses this and other species in the family Goodeniaceae on page 10.

The illustration is by Philippa Nikulinsky.



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