

URBAN ANTICS

WHICH BANKSIA?

It's different today. The modern child's first encounter with a tree could possibly be when they are confronted with their parent's portico pot containing an exotic plant that arguably resembles an Egyptian mummy with an Afro hairdo.

When my parents built their first home in the bush at Scarborough, it was wall to wall banksia trees, native buttercups, prickly Moses and intermittent large eucalypts. What's more, there were no fences . . . at all.

When the banksias were felled to make way for other houses, I would spend hours bouncing on the heavily blossomed and fruited branches, handing out toy tram tickets to little kids while receiving bottle caps from each in return for a wild ride in paradise. And the magnificent banksia blossoms were never wasted, they were gathered as a token of peace for coming home late, the armfuls of silken flower-spikes caressing our flushed faces while fresh nectar seduced the nostrils.

Banksias of the Family Proteaceae are distinctive evergreen trees or shrubs found in much of Australia, with one species in New Guinea. Unlike most other plants, banksias have massive flower-spikes, each generally resembling a 'hairy cylindrical brush' at the end of some branches. The 'brush' is in fact a dense cluster of several hundreds or thousands of flowers arranged spirally around a woody axis. As the buds of each flower mature and unravel in a wave from either the top or the bottom of a spike, they present an acorn shape, particularly on the short stubby inflorescences, as the pollen presenters stiffen and extend outwards. In some species, this produces a beautiful two-toned colour to the spike.

There are eight species of banksia found around the Perth metropolitan area. The two most common species, often found together, are firewood banksia (*B. menziesii*), with its silver grey to rich pinkish-orange flowers, and slender banksia (*B. attenuata*), with its yellow flowers. In areas north of the Swan River, acorn banksia (*B. prionotes*), which prefers yellow sands, is also common and further enhances the colour spectrum thereabouts with its manicured white and orange 'acorns'.

Many nectarivorous animals rely on the banksia flowers as a source of food and, while clambering over the flower-spikes, pollinate them as they travel from tree to tree. While various species of honeyeater gather nectar, insect eaters such as black-faced cuckoo-shrikes, willie wagtails and rainbow bee-eaters plunder the many bugs attracted to the blooms. Possums also invade the trees for insects and nectar.

The larvae of various weevils and moths burrow into the flower-spikes, where they feed on the soft material and developing seeds. Carnaby's black-cockatoo uses the spikes of candle banksia as a chief food source for both seeds and weevil larvae.

One of the unusual things seen in the forks of banksia trees is a strange bunch of dry, brown deformed shoots, commonly referred to as 'witch's brooms'. It is thought that burrowing grubs introduce bacteria

that induce a cancer, and the tree is able to deal with it in such a manner and continues to grow.

Banksias can hardly be discussed in depth in such a brief article as this, so head for the library or your local nursery to enquire further about these true Australians. The forms, flowers and fruits are so many and varied that you may indulge in a prostrate, a dwarf or a giant for your backyard. Even after the beautiful flower has gone, the long-lasting and decorative 'nut' is worthy of being described as the only weird character missing from Walt Disney's 'Fantasia'.

BY JOHN HUNTER

DID YOU KNOW?

- There are 75 species of banksia in all, 59 of which occur in WA.
- Banksias with a thin, smooth bark are susceptible to being killed by fire and reproduce by shedding their winged seed. The seed is shed after the heat of the fire opens the seed follicles.
- Thirty-six species have a thick, rough, fire-tolerant bark and sprout from that, or their underground lignotuber.
- While Aboriginal people dipped the slender banksia or 'biara' in water and sucked the sweet nectar eons before, Joseph Banks first collected four species at Botany Bay in April 1770.

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Winner of the 1998 Alex Harris Medal for excellence in science and environment reporting.

LANDSCOPE



VOLUME SIXTEEN, NUMBER 4, WINTER 2001



Western Australian botanists are taking part in a global plan to store seed from 10 per cent of the world's flora by 2010. See page 23.



Mushrooms the size of a dinner plate can appear within 48 hours of a fire in the karri forest. Read about forest fungi on page 48.



The Pilbara's numerous islands are rich in history, wildflowers and wildlife, with prolific marine life in the surrounding waters. See page 34.



Discover the rich bird life and tranquillity of the Canning River Regional Park on page 17.



Many of WA's threatened marsupials can be seen in the south-west for the first time in decades. Read about their return to Dryandra Forest on page 10.

FEATURES

RETURN TO DRYANDRA
TONY FRIEND, CLARE ANTHONY & NEIL THOMAS10

CAPTIVATING CANNING
CHRISTINE SILBERT.....17

OUR FROZEN FUTURE
ANNE COCHRANE.....23

SEA ANEMONES
ANN STORRIE.....28

PEARLS OF THE PILBARA
DORIAN MORO & FRAN STANLEY.....34

LINKING THE LANDSCAPE
PETER WILKINS.....41

FRUITS OF FIRE
RICHARD ROBINSON.....48

REGULARS

BUSH TELEGRAPH.....4

ENDANGERED
VINE THICKETS ON DAMPIER PENINSULA.....47

URBAN ANTICS
WHICH BANKSIA?.....54

COVER

Paradoxically, the stinging tentacles of sea anemones—a group of carnivorous invertebrates that sometimes resemble colourful flowers—can also provide a safe haven for many underwater creatures. Anemonefish gain immunity to the stinging cells and live primarily in sea anemone tentacles. Other animals, such as crabs, carry a protective anemone on their backs. Turn to page 28.



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