

What's in a name? 'Snottygobble'

by Penny Hussey and Trevor Walley

The name snottygobble conjures weird and wonderful visions of this plant species. So how did such a name arise?

Growing up in Baldivis, Trevor Walley knew a low shrub whose yellow-green fruits, which he called 'snottygobbles', were sought out as bush tucker. The shrub's scientific name is *Persoonia saccata* and the very first popular book on Western Australian wildflowers, Emily Pelloe's marvellous *Wildflowers of Western Australia* published in 1921, gives it the common name of 'swottie bobs'. The next popular publication, *West Australian Wild Flowers*, first published by *The West Australian* in 1935 and running to many reprints and new editions, did not mention persoonias at all. By the publication of Erickson *et al's Wildflowers of Western Australia* in 1973, the whole genus *Persoonia* was being referred to as 'snottygobbles'. Where did this odd name come from?

A name's origins

Common names are part of the living, cultural heritage, reflecting ordinary people's knowledge of the land around them. As part of getting to know Australia, settlers would have transferred familiar names to unfamiliar,



but vaguely similar plants. A good example is the name 'buttercup' given in Western Australia to species in the genus *Hibbertia*, not at all related to the buttercup of Europe. But they do have golden-yellow cup-shaped flowers that spangle the bush in springtime.

In the United Kingdom, yew trees have squishy fruits with a hard centre. Growing up in Wiltshire, Penny Hussey

called these fruits 'snotty gogs' (or 'snotty globs') and remembers that naughty small boys liked to put them where a girl could inadvertently squidge them—like down the neck of her blouse. The girls, of course, responded with obligatory squeals of disgust! Arriving in WA, the children would soon have discovered any squishy fruits, especially if shown them by Aboriginal friends. It is likely



Above *Persoonia acicularis*.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

Left *Persoonia saccata* fruits.

Right *Persoonia sulcata*.
Photos – Trevor Walley/DEC

they simply transferred the name to their new land as an oral tradition.

Chinese whispers

Such things were not written down until much later and can change during this time, especially if they were part of the lore and language of school children. But once a name becomes formalised in a widely distributed publication, a ‘common name’ becomes set.

So this is how we think the name snottygobble got here—via settlers’ kids. Although the plant was well known to be good bush tucker, alas no Nyoongar name—also transmitted in oral tradition—seems to have survived. Perhaps all the kids just liked the name ‘snottygobble’—it is a super word—so that’s the one that remained in use.

What’s a snottygobble?

Snottygobbles (*Persoonia* spp.) are in the banksia family, Proteaceae. There are 98 species, all endemic to Australia, but with a stronghold in south-west WA. They range from being small shrubs of 0.1 metres to trees of 25 metres high. They have small to medium-sized leaves which are arranged alternately. Like the rest of their family, the flower parts are in fours but they are not clustered in dense inflorescences like banksias. Two of the most well-known species in WA are found in the jarrah forest, round-leaved snottygobble (*P. elliptica*) and long-leaved snottygobble (*P. longifolia*). These beautiful small trees would make excellent specimens in gardens of the Perth hills. Fauna like them too, possums adore the squishy fruit and night birds such as tawny frog-mouths shelter in the dense foliage during the day.



Penny Hussey is the Department of Environment and Conservation’s (DEC’s) *Land for Wildlife* coordinator. She can be contacted on (08) 9334 0530 or by email (penny.hussey@dec.wa.gov.au).

Trevor Walley is a DEC project officer and can be contacted by email (trevor.walley@dec.wa.gov.au).



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Phone (08) 9334 0296 Fax (08) 9334 0432.

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