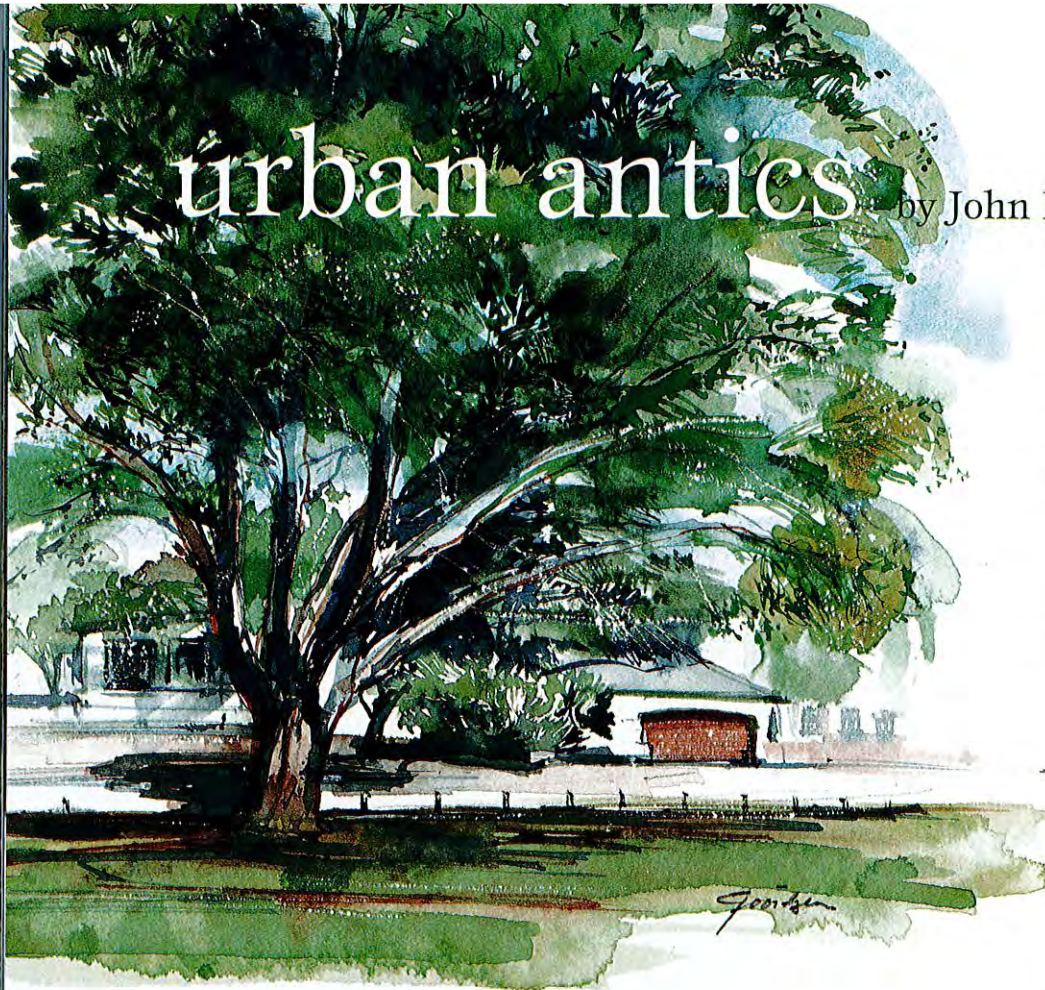


# urban antics

by John Hunter



## Eucalypts ...

In this 'International Year of Forests', it really seems there is an incongruity between the present parched, concrete desert of the Perth urban area and a sumptuous native forest of some international standing.

But there is a connection; for while there is a desperate need for reforestation and sustainable management of world native forests, there is also a need to protect and manage our own large endemic trees throughout Perth's environs.

I can hear the rumblings of disagreement from the western suburbs of shady exotica where a rubber tree is preferable to a eucalypt and from the vandals on the hill in Mosmans who recently ringbarked the last giant tuart between them and a Swan River view.

Of the 79 larger native tree species found around Perth, only 16 species are eucalypts or 'gum trees, the word 'gum' referring to the dried sap first observed by explorers on smooth-barked species

on the eastern seaboard some 300 years ago.

In Australia, eucalypts do not grow naturally where there is less than 250 millimetres of annual rainfall unless it is special habitat, like a watercourse. Because the gums are therefore absent from most of the continent, wattles are considered far more typically Australian.

The genus name *Eucalyptus* means 'well covered' and while some people think it refers solely to the pungent aroma of the oil in the leaves, it also references how (in all

species) the stamens are covered by a cap in bud.

The mostly crescent-shaped leaves of eucalypts are also distinctive in the way they are held on the tree. They hang down to conserve water, their surfaces facing morning and afternoon sun rather than the stifling heat of noon. Seedlings, however, usually situated under mature trees, need direct sunlight so their immature leaves are rounded, broader and held flat.

Growing up in the north-western suburbs in the 1940s and 50s, and relishing the inevitable bush escapades with now long-gone school mates, was then, as the lyrics of that old pop song goes ... "green, green it's green they say on the far side of the hill".

In those days, everyone's backyard contained at least one giant marri which bristled with ripening honky nuts and squabbling black cockies. In the spare block next door huge tuarts supported bric-a-brac tree houses and cool green cubbies while down the road the flooded gums of Perry Lakes shaded exploring cubs and scouts. And the jarrahs? Well they were singularly spectacular with their reddish bark, but more prolific on the Darling Plateau where, on weekend picnics, mum and dad cooked 'snaggers' and damper for us kids ... a valuable lesson on the simple side of life, and never forgotten.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- Although rich in flora, Perth is poor in eucalypts with only 16 species occurring naturally.
- Eucalypts are part of the myrtle family which is also commonly found in South America, South Africa and Southeast Asia, lending weight to the theory that Australia was once part of a huge southern continent.
- The next edition of *LANDSCOPE* magazine will feature an article about the joys and challenges of creating native gardens and retaining native trees.
- The whole story can be read in *Leaf and branch*, a book on trees and tall shrubs of Perth by Robert Powell. The book is available from DEC.



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Phone (08) 9219 8000.

**Prepress and printing** GEON, Western Australia.

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June 2011

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ISSN 0815-4465

Please do not send unsolicited material, but feel free to contact the editors.

Published by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), 17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

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Department of Environment and Conservation



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