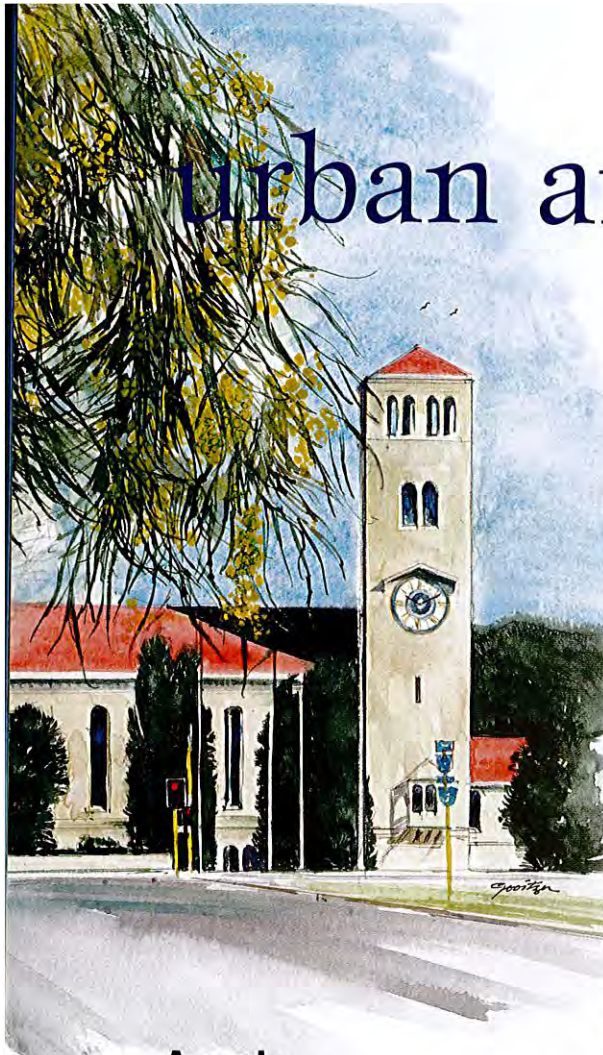


urban antics

by John Hunter



Acacia

This last antic celebrating the 'International Year of Forests' is about a plant genus which is both species rich and prolific in our country ... far exceeding the great eucalypts in abundance, while also being our national floral emblem.

Acacia, from the Fabaceae (legume or pea) family, are found virtually everywhere throughout the state and indeed across the whole country. They also inhabit, naturally, the tropical to arid warmer terrestrial parts of the world. However, what is significant, is that of the about 1,500 species in the world, some 1,000 are found in Australia, with well over half that located in Western Australia.

Not your generally accepted 'forest'—where wall-to-wall tree trunks and closed canopies of leaf and branch dominate—wattles are an understorey family found as single prostrate plants, groups of trees, sporadic woodlands, dense shrubs in vast carpets of loosely mixed

vegetation and ... tall individual trees.

Within Australia, acacia are called wattles, the name dating from Anglo-Saxon times and signifying the activity of 'wattling' where twigs, saplings or flexible rods were interwoven to build frameworks for dwellings. In Australia during early settlement, this was done with wattles; thus the common name for the genus arose.

To me, wattles are the enigma of the plant world. Not only are they prolific in number and diversity, but there are many varieties within their own species. In fact, it is inevitable that in time, new species will be described by further research and exploration of those areas and types already known. To fully describe the genus, its species, its idiosyncrasies and natural history on one page is virtually impossible.

For me, walking to school in spring was a time which pleasantly assaulted one's senses, particularly at a time of youthful sensitivity and learning. The noise of birdlife was frenetic, dull bushland gave birth to multicoloured rashes of colour, and pollens from ripening winter grasses irritated the membrane of many an urban 'nosey parker'. This 'excitement' always heralded the golden wattles that burst into cascading racemes of cylinders and pompoms. This was, and still is, a time that no clock can ever tell.

The most prevalent of the urban wattles was prickly

moses (*Acacia pulchella*). This normally scraggly shrub of no fixed address loiters randomly across the Swan Coastal Plain and through our suburbs. In spring it sports wonderful globules of inflorescence among its inconspicuous leaves. Occasionally, unwary bushwalkers have been easily mesmerised and caught in its dense spiny thickets and heard to exclaim, 'watch out for the bloody prickly bushes!' Meanwhile, attendant ants busy themselves for the coming harvest of seeds while many-coloured Christmas spiders prepare to weave magic between the thorns.

Then there is the coojong or golden-wreath wattle (*A. saligna*), now common along the freeway or evident as invading seedlings on many a construction site. In times past, exploring children sought solace and protection among the large, dark blue-green leaves (called phyllodes in this species) and weeping habit of this medium-size tree, particularly near wetland areas where it originally occurred in large numbers. This beautiful tree supports burrowing jewel beetles within its stems, geckoes, butterflies and nesting birds among its branches and insects within strange rust-fungus galls among its foliage.

There is so much more to the story of wattle ... the rest can be found on the website 'World Wide Wattle'... check it out, it will be worth it.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Dallwalinu is the centre of the greatest concentration of wattle species in the world.
- Mulga is the Aboriginal word given to vast tracts of wattle vegetation in the north eastern wheatbelt of WA.
- Some fascinating common names for the wattle include brigalow, myall, jam, bowgada, gundabluey, gidgee, kurara, old man wodjill and Cootamundra wattle.

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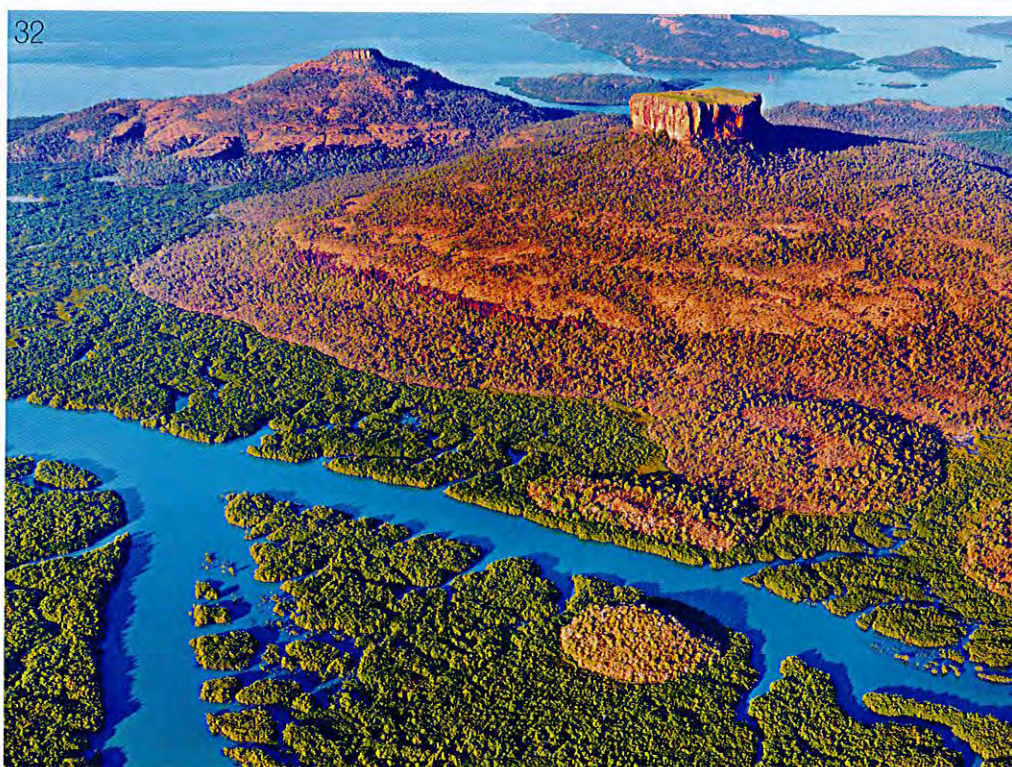
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