urban antics

by John Hunter

Grass trees

In Western Australia, most of us live in the urban environs of Perth and Fremantle which is, coincidentally, exactly half way between Geraldton and Walpole and therefore about the centre of the habitat of the western grass tree (*Xanthorrhoea preissii*). This common endemic urban tree is the biggest and most spectacular in its genus.

In the Perth region there are several species of grass trees, or balga, along with the kingia, which is uncommon and of a different family. The genus *Xanthorrhoea* is confined to Australia, where there are more than 30 species, of which 10 occur in WA.

If you are lucky enough to have one or some of these small trees on your property you may treasure the feeling of the great outdoors, the artistry of natural sculpture and perhaps an ancient Aboriginal culture that still appreciates and uses the grass tree in daily domestic life. For thousands of years Australian Aboriginal people have probably reaped more resources from this one plant than any other. They collected the resin flakes from the trunk and flower stalk, heated them and rolled them into balls. This gum would then be reheated and used as glue to make and mend traditional weapons and implements. European settlers also harvested the material to make vanishes and lacquers.

The balga grass tree is widespread over its territory and copes well in most soil types from the clay gravels of the Darling Range plateau to the varying sands of the Swan Coastal Plain. Here though, you will also notice smaller grass trees without visible trunks and some others with differing flower spikes. These are of the same genus but differing species. They do not match the mature grandeur of *X. preissii*, which reaches more than four metres high, with multi-branched heads and flowering 'spears' growing up to three metres long.

In earlier times, when urban folk cleared their blocks of land for building, the eucalypts and banksias down by the back fence were sometimes spared, along with the odd wattle, but it was not part of the local psyche or even fashionable to save a common old 'black boy' as they were called then by all and sundry. My father's generation and before used the term simply because, after fire burnt away the dead leaf skirts of a tree, the remaining charcoal stubble on the bared trunk with a head of leafy spiked 'hair' and attached flower spike, especially in front of a setting sun, resembled an ancient proud Aboriginal warrior leaning on a spear while surveying his lands. To my school mates and me, the tree trunk charcoal was just the 'ants' pants' for there was nothing better with which to smudge war paint on our faces and pretend to be warriors of another kind.

As was often the case in the 1950s, rather than spend a 'big quid' on weekend entertainment, Dad would pile everyone into the family Triumph Mayflower sedan and head to the John Forrest or Yanchep national parks for a picnic. Here in the real bush, one could experience just how attractive the grass trees were. From high points on the Darling Scarp, small valleys glistened with armies of grass trees that reflected afternoon sunshine, while on the plain at Yanchep the individual balgas in the back areas of the park stood like giant extraterrestrial 'wookies' from a yet-to-be-invented Star Wars movie.

So great was the impression these plants left on me that when they became available in nurseries for urban gardens some years ago, it bought back fond memories of simpler times.

Have you ever studied the artistry in a mature balga? They are all so different, and they sing when the wind passes through their long slender leaves.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The balga's flowering spear comprises: the scape, the spear's non-flowering stem; and the spike, which is packed with thousands of white flowers that attract honeyeaters, bees, wasps, ants, jewel beetles and butterflies.
- The average growth rate of the grass tree is about one and a half centimetres a year.
- The balga's trunk is built from layers of flat leaf-bases which equates to about 580 new leaves each year. When it dies, fungi and native fly larvae cause it to rot, leaving the cylinder of leaf-bases as reptile habitat.

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