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VERTICORDIAS: WHAT ARE THEY, WHERE CAN THEY BE FOUND AND WHY DO THEY NEED PROTECTION?

by Elizabeth George

SOME of the most brilliantly coloured plants lighting up the country landscape from early spring onwards are *Verticordia* species - or Featherflowers, Morrison and Bush Cauliflower which are but some of the names by which these often spectacularly beautiful shrubs are commonly known. I prefer the botanical name *Verticordia* (literally meaning 'turner of hearts') because it is applied to all this genus (group) of plants which belong to the family Myrtaceae. They have flowers with 5 'feathery', 'hairy' or 'woolly' sepals, 5 petals, usually 10 stamens and 10 staminodes or sterile stamens (although *V. picta* and *V. rennieana* have 5 stamens and 15 staminodes) and a single style; all attached to a hypanthium or calyx tube. Sometimes the outer floral whorl which are called sepals appear to be more like long hairs than feathers and in some species the hairs are so fine and intricately interwoven that they look almost woolly. Currently known are 100 species and within them 13 subspecies and 30 varieties.



Verticordia picta

Morrison-flower was the common name first attributed by early settlers to the summer-flowering, almost iridescent orange-coloured plant (growing in Banksia



Verticordia ovalifolia

woodlands between Harvey and north of the Moore River) which later became *V. nitens*. Over the years the name changed to Orange Morrison, Christmas Morrison or simply Morrison, a name which was also applied to other species such as the brilliant yellow flowered *V. chrysantha* which is widespread from Kalbarri National Park through to the south coast, the beautiful pale to very deep pink flowered *V. monadelphica* (Eurardy Station through Mullewa and Eneabba to Amery) and the striking red flowered *V. etheliana* which grows on sand ridges between Billabong and the Yuna area. The name Bush Cauliflower covers most of the cream and white cauliflower-like species such as *V. polytricha* and *V. capillaris* which occur on the sandplains north and east of Geraldton, *V. eriocephala* (previously known as *V. brownii*) occurring between Mt Adams, north of Eneabba, and Israelite Bay, and *V. roei* which can be found through the south-eastern agricultural regions between Merredin, Peak Charles and Ongerup.

Verticordias vary from tiny, almost bizarre, prostrate shrubs through a broad range of shapes, sizes and flower colours to large

shrubs or small trees up to 7m tall. They are found growing naturally only in Western Australia and the Northern Territory where 3 species, *V. cunninghamii*, *V. verticillata* and *V. decussata* occur. The greatest number of species occur in the south-western corner of WA between Shark Bay and Israelite Bay, although a few can be found in the pastoral station country and the first two of the tropical species reach into the Kimberley area. They grow in differing soil types from various kinds of sand and gravel to heavier loams and clay soils and in a wide range of habitats such as sand ridges, open sandplains, heaths, shrublands and open woodlands. These can be located near the ocean or inland, beside rivers, adjacent to salt lakes, on and around small to large rock outcrops, or hills and even mountains.

A few species such as the unusual Wongan Featherflower, *V. staminosa*, and some forms of the Painted Featherflower, *V. picta*, which is also known as China Cups, flower early in the season through winter and spring. Many species flower during the spring months, although some of these and others bloom well into summer. Several near the south coast such as the pine-like *V. pityrhops*, Autumn Featherflower *V. harveyi*, and *V. seiberi* begin to bloom late in summer then continue through autumn until early winter. A few species - like the spectacular Scarlet Featherflower, *V. grandis*, which can be seen from Geraldton to Badgingarra - as well as having a couple of main flushes of flowering, bloom sporadically throughout the year. The rare southern Coast Featherflower, *V. helichrysantha*,

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bears its quaint lemon-yellow 'papery' blossoms in both spring and autumn when sufficient rains fall. In fact quite a number of them flower longer, or again after unseasonal rainfall and if one knows where to look, at least one species, and often many more, can be found in flower every month of the year!



Verticordia grandis

Besides producing beautiful or unusual flowers providing magnificent colour displays and vistas for local Western Australians as well as tourists, *Verticordias* primarily attract and produce nectar

and pollen for a wide range of insects including various ants, beetles and bugs, flies, bees and wasps, butterflies and moths. These as well as marsupials and nectar feeding birds. Some species are quite common occurring over relatively large areas, but others are rare, with far too many being vulnerable on roadsides. All of them form an important part of the natural food-chain in remnant vegetation, especially because it is becoming increasingly evident through the work of Terry Houston, that some of them provide sustenance for a number of host-specific (confined to a particular plant) specialised native bee species. More detailed analysis of their values is given in the article on *V. eriocephala* by Sarah McEvoy and Denise True ... and we are only discussing one genus of the many which occur in our State! It is therefore vital to preserve and protect

as many as possible of the remaining small reserves as well as large and small pieces of natural bushland, particularly those in areas which have already been cleared.

Elizabeth George is an amateur botanist who developed a fascination for Verticordia after moving to Western Australia in 1970. From 1978-88, with the help of many volunteer collectors and observers throughout this State, she compiled the Verticordia Reference Collection which can be consulted in the public section of the WA Herbarium. At present her comprehensive book, featuring life-sized watercolour paintings by Margaret Pieroni of all the described Verticordias, is in the final stages of preparation for publishing.

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