

FLORA

Marvellous
Melaleucas

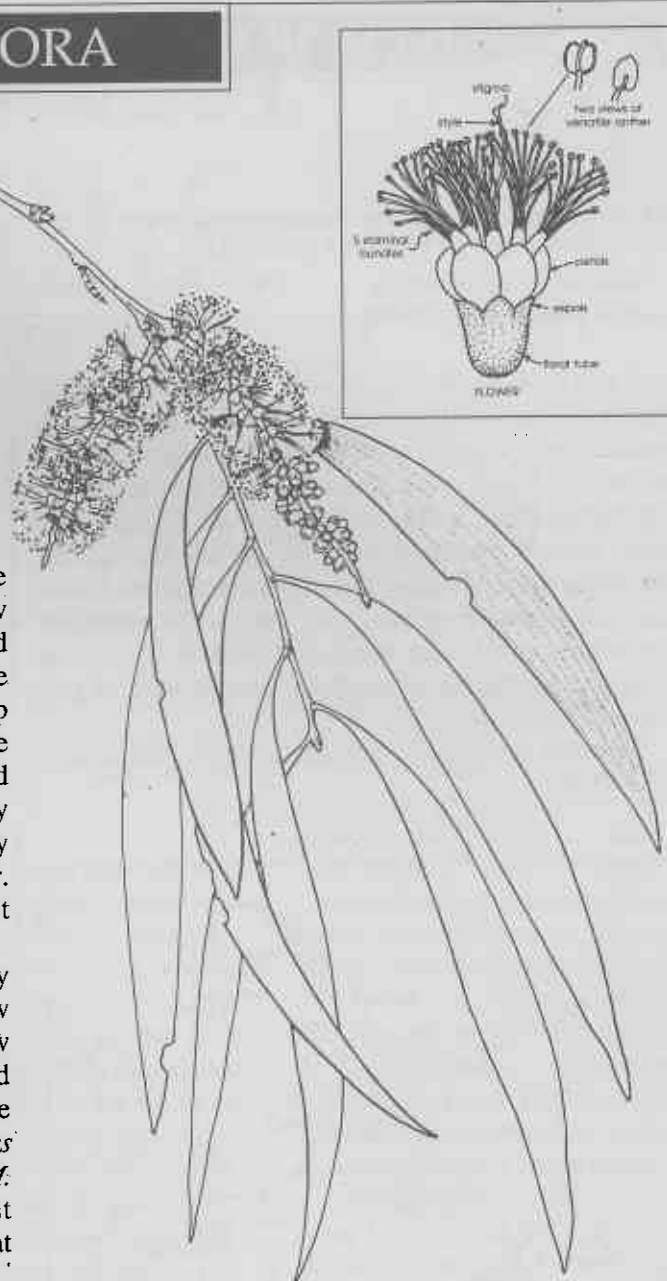
AROUND all the estuaries, lakes and rivers where early European colonists first settled, grow magnificent trees with white bark that can be peeled off in sheets. The settlers noted that Aboriginal people used these sheets to cover their mia-mias, or to wrap around fish before baking on the coals. Of course the trees were called 'Paperbarks', the first published record of that name being in 1842. Colourful shrubby relatives were called 'Honey-myrtles' because they were in the myrtle family and produced copious nectar. Nowadays we often use the scientific name, and just call them melaleucas.

There are about 220 species of melaleucas, mostly in Australia, but a few are found as far away as New Caledonia. Over 180 species occur in WA, and new species are being described all the time. One named recently honours *Land for Wildlife's* Rob and Anne Smart of Jerramungup; it is called *Melaleuca sapientes* (from the Latin meaning 'wise'!). Another is *M. tinkeri*, after *LFWer* Alan Tinker; the botanist concerned often stayed at the Tinkers' caravan park at Eneabba.

Melaleucas can be shrubs or trees. The flowers are grouped into spikes or heads. They have small petals and showy stamens, grouped into five bundles. The filament is fixed to the middle of the anther, allowing it to rock backwards and forwards. This arrangement is called 'versatile', and is a quick way of distinguishing this genus from the related genera of *Regelia*, *Eremaea*, *Beaufortia* and *Calothamnus*. (If it has versatile anthers but stamens not grouped into bundles, it's a *Callistemon* or a *Kunzea* - well, probably!) The hard woody fruits have three chambers, each containing numerous tiny seeds.

Like other members of its family, melaleuca leaves contain oils with a heady scent and, possibly, germicidal properties. 'Tea-tree Oil' comes from *M. alternifolia*, an eastern states species. Various WA species are under investigation for their oil content.

Leaves, flowers and seeds all provide food for various invertebrates, but it is probably the flowers which are most important for fauna. While many



melaleucas are spring flowering, others extend well into summer and all are a very important resource for nectar-eating insects and birds. The provision of nesting sites is also important, especially along waterbodies, where Paperbarks provide both roosting and nesting sites for waterbirds.

Melaleucas grow in almost all vegetation types in the south-west of WA, but they are especially important in wetlands, sandplains and granite ecosystems. The seed is easy to collect - just remove the fruits and place in a paper bag in a warm, dry place until they open and the seeds fall out. Most germinate and direct seed well.

No matter where your revegetation project is, or on what soil type or landscape position, you will find several melaleucas to enrich your planting by providing habitat for fauna and beauty for the human eye.

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