

FLORA

WATTLE - SYMBOL OF A NATION

Claire Hall

In 1988 Australia celebrated its bicentennial year and one of the many events that occurred was the official proclamation of Australia's national floral emblem, the Golden Wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*).

It may seem surprising that it had taken 200 years to decide which of our native flora should be elevated to this lofty position. The reasons can be traced back to our so-called 'new world' settler societies, which struggled to master an alien environment and placed little value on its intrinsic beauty. The decision was influenced by patriotism, political and social power-plays, economic imperatives, and inter-colonial rivalry.

By the late 19th century the first generations of native born Australians were developing a "sense of place" and beginning to acknowledge their connection with the land and its flora and fauna. The Australian Natives Association (ANA) was established in 1871 as a mutual benefit or friendly society with birth in an Australian colony being a pre-requisite for membership. Its members, predominantly children of the gold-rush immigrants in Victoria, wanted to gain political and social power by challenging the misconceptions about the Australian-born being lazy, sport-loving, foul-mouthed and lacking respect for authority.

By the 1880s the ANA was pushing hard for a federated Australia and looking for symbols to reflect their national pride. The ladies' committee of the ANA inaugurated the Wattle Blossom League in 1890 to promote a sense of patriotism among Australian women and the younger generation.

Inspired by Canada's adoption of the maple leaf as its floral emblem the ANA campaigned for the wattle to be nominated as Australia's national flower. The Silver Wattle (*A. dealbata*), Black Wattle (*A. mearnsii*) and Golden Wattle (*A. pycnantha*) were suggested as being suitable species. In its favour, the wattle was present in all Australian colonies, it was important in the tanning industry and it had a beautiful flower.

Not everyone agreed, and there was strong support for the Waratah (*Telopea speciosissima*), a more spectacular



Wattle used as an ornamental accessory to the shield on the Commonwealth Coat of Arms granted by Royal Warrant in 1912. Permission to reproduce granted by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

but geographically restricted species, to be named Australia's national flower. Ultimately, the ANA with the support of the Wattle League won the day and the Golden Wattle was chosen as Australia's national floral emblem. Despite this decision, official proclamation for a national floral emblem was not forthcoming.

In 1901 Australian symbols were largely absent from federation celebrations in Sydney and Melbourne as they were thought to be irrelevant to international trade. Interestingly, it was the Victorian German community who displayed an arch featuring the local lyrebird.

Fortunately, interest in all things Australian continued to grow. Wattle enthusiast Archibald James Campbell was an ornithologist, newspaper columnist, and founder of a Wattle Club in Victoria in 1899. He promoted appreciation of acacias through visits to wattle-rich places in Victoria, usually around the 1st of September. Campbell took up the cause of promoting wattle as a national symbol and in 1908 he presented a lecture to the Photographic Clubs of the Melbourne Technical College entitled 'Wattle time; or Yellow-haired September'. He stated that 'by numbers, the Wattle is almost exclusively Australian, and should undoubtedly be our National Flower'.

A Wattle Day League was formed in Sydney in 1909 and subsequently branches were formed in South Australia, Victoria and Queensland. In 1912 in a move which appears to be the first call for *A. pycnantha* exclusively to be the Australian national flower, the Adelaide branch of the Wattle Day League formally adopted as one of its aims: 'to establish golden wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*) as the national flower and emblem of Australia'.

In 1911 the belief by many Australians in their exclusive right to use the wattle as a national symbol was challenged. Readers of the *Evening News* in South Australia were upset by a report of South Africa's proposal to use the wattle for patriotic purposes. When South Africa elected to have wattle embroidered on

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King George V's coronation stole it caused outrage among some Australians who believed that this wattle was imported from Australia. Unless the embroidery featured the distinctive thorns of the South African species 'Doornbloom' *A. karroo*, it could have been mistaken for an Australian species.

The use of the wattle blossom as an Australian national symbol continued during the early part of the 20th century and on 13th August 1912 buttonholes of wattle and boronia (then the WA floral emblem) were sold in Perth. On 26th January 1913 Selfridges department store in London had a display of 'mimosa' to mark Australia's 125th birthday.

In 1912 a new Commonwealth Coat of Arms was designed, but the wattle depicted is not botanically accurate and may not be *A. pycnantha*. The following year the Australian Wattle Day League held the first pan-Australian Wattle Day Conference. The importance of the event was evidenced by the formal opening of the conference by the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon. Andrew Fisher who recommended the wattle for inclusion in the design of the Australian armorial bearings. Delegates from Victoria, NSW, SA, WA and Tasmania attended the conference which led to the federalization of the Wattle Day League movement.

World War I delayed the proclamation of wattle as the national floral emblem, but Wattle Day was used to encourage patriotism and to raise funds for Australia's war effort.

Wattle Day reached its peak in the 1920s when farmers within a day's drive of Melbourne began to complain about over-enthusiastic members of the public tearing limbs from trees to festoon their cars then leaving gates open. Wattle Day continued to be celebrated through the 1930s, but not in WA and the Northern Territory, and

the tradition declined after World War II.

On 1st September 1988 the Golden Wattle was officially gazetted as Australia's national floral emblem. In 1992 the Governor-General declared that 1st September would be observed as 'National Wattle Day' – 'an opportunity for all Australians to celebrate our floral heritage, particularly through the planting of an Acacia species suitable for the area in which they live'.

The wheatbelt of WA is wattle-rich and two local government authorities in that area have a wattle species as their floral emblem. The Shire of Dalwallinu has *A. anthochaera* (Kimberly's wattle) and the Shire of Hyden has *A. lanei* (Lane's wattle). In September each year the Shire of Dalwallinu hosts an Annual Wattle Week Festival that includes day tours and other events (see coming events in this Newsletter).

The wattle, has been a popular subject for artists, embroiderers, architects and designers over the years, and has featured on many Australian postage stamps. Golden Wattle motifs feature on the ribbons of the Order of Australia insignia.

Critics of the choice of the Golden Wattle as Australia's floral emblem may say that it is not a 'truly national' flower because it is not endemic to all states. The chances of finding a species that is found in every state, has suitable characteristics and which everyone agrees on would be extremely remote and could take another 200 years to decide upon. The best solution is to view any wattle in your local area as the symbol of our nation.

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Note: A, pycnantha is an environmental weed in WA! - Ed.