

FLORA

WHAT WILDFLOWER IS THAT?

Erica Shedley

How many times have you wandered through your bushland, or a nearby Reserve, and thought "I'd love to know the name of that plant" or "I wonder if this plant is different to the one in my neighbour's bush?" Once your bushland or wetland is fenced off and regenerating, you may be seeing new plants emerging that have not been seen on your property before. Now is the time to find out what you really have - it might be something quite special.

There are now more than 80 regional herbaria throughout Western Australia, which create and maintain local reference collections of plants to be used as a community resource. Regional herbaria are usually run by local volunteers who collect wildflowers (and weeds) in their districts and send duplicates to the WA Herbarium for identification. The volunteers also collect information about where the plants are growing, their height, form and habit, the soil and landform, associated vegetation and fire history which greatly increases our knowledge about the species. Many new species and subspecies have been discovered through the regional herbarium network, as well as range extensions of known species.

Volunteers in regional herbaria are trained to collect and identify plants and are available to assist local landholders to identify plants growing on their properties. This local expertise can be used by other community groups and shires involved in revegetation projects, by school groups for Eco-education programs, by visitor centres interested in conducting wildflower walks or publishing local wildflower brochures or booklets, and by wildlife photographers. Most regional herbaria also maintain a collection of local weeds that is a valuable resource for landholders needing to identify invasive species.



Annual, 15cm, cream flowers. On white gravelly sand under mallee. Year following fire. Kukerin, Sep 05



Low shrub to 70 cm, leaves needle-like, dense and crowded. Flowers bright red. On laterite under powderbark. York, Apr 06.



Annual to 70 cm, delicate white flowers. On alluvium under flooded gum, year following fire. Helena Valley, July 05

Regional herbaria have an important role in documenting and conserving our biodiversity. Thousands of specimens have been collected through this network and catalogued by the WA Herbarium. Many new populations of threatened species have been found, allowing better understanding of the responses of these species to disturbance leading to improved management practices. A number of volunteers are also members of threatened flora recovery teams and are actively involved in survey, monitoring and recovery work with DEC district flora officers and botanists.

The South West Catchments Council recently funded a project to support the activities of 14 regional herbaria in the South West Natural Resource Management region. Two liaison officers are currently assisting volunteers with flora surveys, maintaining and expanding their collections, and training new volunteers. Frances Kirchner is operating from the Bunbury DEC regional office and supports the western and northern herbaria, while Erica Shedley operates from Bridgetown and supports the eastern and southern herbaria. Erica and Frances are organising workshops this spring on plant collection and plant identification for interested herbarium volunteers and landholders.

So if you thought that a herbarium was just a collection of dead plants, think again! Now is the time to find out what is actually growing in your bushland. Ask your local regional herbarium volunteers to visit your property and collect some plant material for identification. Better still why not learn how to do this yourself?

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