

THE BANKSIA

It is no surprise to guess that the Banksia was named after Sir Joseph Banks, the 18th Century Botanist that came to Australia with Captain Cook aboard the Endeavour. There are around 72 species of Banksia worldwide and all but one of them is endemic and confined to Australia. *Banksia dentata* is the only exception because it extends to New Guinea.

Banksias occur in every Australia State and Territory but by far the greatest concentration of species is in the southwest of Western Australia. They range from prostrate plants to shrubs and trees. Banksia produce spectacular flowers that always seem to grow perfectly vertical, no matter what direction the branches of the bush are growing.

Banksias produce an enormous amount of nectar and are a major food source for nectar eating birds like Honey Eaters and Lorikeets and marsupials like the Honey Possum, Brown Antechinus and Sugar Glider. The Banksia has continued to rely on pollination from these Australian native invertebrates rather than adapt to pollination by introduced insects like the European Honey Bee. One 19th century English commentator reported that the nectar of a Banksia is so abundant in some species that when in flower, the nectar of some species drips to the ground and forms a puddle and bees and wasps become intoxicated and lose their lives in it!

The foliage of the Banksia is as diverse and the growth habit of the species. Some coastal Banksias such as *Banksia integrifolia* and *Banksia serrata* have large leaves with toothed margins whereas *Banksia ericifolia* has narrow and soft foliage that encircles the stem. All have the distinctive vertical cones ranging in colour from Lime Green to Lemon Yellow, Burnt Orange and occasionally red tinges.

The seed cones last a longtime on the bush and persist long after the seed pods have opened. The seed pod can resist high temperatures and will protect the seed through summer heat and fire if it needs to. As with a lot of Australian natives, fire is an accepted part of the lifecycle of many species. Banksia seed pods will be triggered to open after a fire has passed through so the regrowth can occur as quickly as possible. In the absence of fire, the cones will eventually open naturally anyway.

Banksias make very good low maintenance garden plants but some varieties have fairly stringent needs such as deep sandy soils that are often hard to duplicate in the home garden. The root system of the Banksia appreciates protection from heat so mulching or growing in conjunction with ground cover species is a good idea.

Banksia is also a traditional food source. *Banksia integrifolia* flowers that are soaked in water will produce a syrup that will soothe a sore throat. Left to ferment, the syrup will become a mild alcohol solution called "Bool". The nectar can also be sucked directly

from the flower but too much will cause headaches and nausea. The bark can be burnt to ash and applied to skin sores as a healing agent. Young green buds on some Banksia can be chewed like chewing gum and will act as a hunger and thirst suppressant.

Early European settlers were attracted by the fine grain and rich red colour of the Banksia timber. Larger growing species were harvested for furniture and decorative work. Banksia integrifolia was used to construct Bi-planes and the smaller seed cones were soaked with fat and used by bushmen as night lights. Banksia spikes are widely used in art and flower decoration and were immortalised by May Gibbs as the Evil Banksia Men in her Snugglepots and Cuddlepie book series.

Banksia is well worthwhile trying as a backyard plant. They like a well-drained location and a good amount of sun. They are drought and frost tolerant when they are established. The following species are usually readily available in nurseries.

Banksia aemula – Wallum Banksia – tree to 8m. Cream pins, cream/lemon core.

Banksia collina – Hill Banksia – shrub to 3m, orange pins & orange core

Banksia ericifolia – Heath Leafed Banksia – shrub to 6m, pins and core orange.

Banksia integrifolia – Coast Banksia – tree species to 10m tall, golden pins and core

Banksia marginata – Silver Banksia – shrub to 2m, yellow pins & core.

Banksia oblongifolia – Fern Leafed Banksia – shrub to 3m, white flowers with pink core.

Banksia serrata – Old man Banksia – shrub to 3m, cream pins, yellow core.

Banksia spinulosa – Hairpin Banksia – shrub to 3m, burnt orange/brown pins with creamy orange core.

There are also several Dwarf varieties of Banksia integrifolia, Banksia ericifolia and Banksia spinulosa on the market that may suit the smaller home garden. There are also a few groundcover ones like Banksia integrifolia Roller Coaster that make an interesting feature.