

BORDER CROSSINGS

ORIGINS

BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

Banksias



Orange Banksia flowers

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Banksia_flowers_plant_orange.jpg

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

The Cadigal people from the area we now call Sydney in New South Wales use the name “wiryagan” for Banksia Serrata tree. The now common name “Wallum Banksia” is also used and is derived from an Indigenous name.

When was this plant first documented?

Banksia specimens were first collected in 1770 by Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander at a place later named Botany Bay by James Cook because of “the great quantity of plants Mr Banks and Dr Solander found in this place”. The specimens were ‘officially’ named Banksia in 1782 after the report about them was published.

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are over 170 species of Banksia. One variety (*Banksia dentata*) is found in northern Australia and on several islands to the north of Australia including New Guinea and the Aru Islands. Fossilised leaves of the now extinct *Banksia novae-zelandiae* variety were found in New Zealand.

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

The Banksia species is native to Australia. It is very resistant to drought and fire. The flowers contain large amounts of nectar which can be drunk and also attracts animals which can be hunted. For these reasons, Banksias have been cultivated by Indigenous people as they are a source of fluids and as a lure for animals.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

The Banksia trees and shrubs are culturally important to the Indigenous peoples of Australia. Banksia have adapted to the frequent wildfires and burnings and they release their seed pods during or shortly after fires. The practice of cool / cultural burning helps manage the trees so the trees are part of a balanced inter-relationship system between the people, wildlife and fire. Banksia trees and shrubs produce a large amount of nectar which attracts many animals including bats, birds, possums and rats. The birds that are attracted to the trees for the nectar are hunted and trapped for food. The nectar can be eaten or added to water to sweeten it.

When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

Seeds and cuttings were brought back to Britain and by 1778, Banksia plants were being grown in Britain. Several specimens were taken to Kew Gardens. They had to be grown in greenhouses as they are highly susceptible to frost damage.

Special properties

The flower cones of all species of Banksias shrubs and trees can be soaked in water in a bark or wooden bowl to make sweet drinks from the nectar. This is often done in the summer months to make water taste better. The Noongar people of southwest Western Australia steep the flower spikes in hot water to make a tea to relieve coughs and sore throats. The Indigenous people of southwestern Australia suck on the flower spikes and drink the nectar. The dry cones of Silver Banksia, are used by the Indigenous people from the area we now call Victoria to strain drinking water. The dried seed cones are also used to carry small smouldering fires to use for 'cool burning' land management and clearance, where fires are used to clear the undergrowth and for hunting. This practice also means that areas susceptible to wildfires are cleared and less likely to have dangerous wildfires. Single flowers are sometimes used as fine paint brushes. The wood from the Banksia tree is also used to make needles to weave baskets and mats. The Banksia trees are a reliable source of insect larvae which are often eaten, providing a good source of protein, fat, magnesium, potassium, vitamin B1 and zinc.

Fun facts

The tallest species of Banksia trees are the Coast Banksia and River Banksia which can grow up to 30 metres tall.



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