

IN PRAISE OF THE MIGHTY EUCALYPTUS

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Unaccustomed as I am to writing articles for HPS Newsletters, I felt moved to respond to the one appearing in the Spring 2015 edition of the Derbyshire Group Newsletter, about the unfortunate eucalyptus destined for the fire; really a story of 'right plant, wrong place'. I found that I was feeling a noticeable degree of discomfort, rather than enjoying the excellently written, amusing article. Why was this? The answer: I have a great fondness for the eucalyptus! Hence, I am attempting to describe some of the examples of the genus which have given me joy.

My admiration for the tree began in 1976. We were the proud owners of a half acre plot on the edge of the Peak District, with little in it but nettles, willow herb, and a few shrubs and boundary trees. It hadn't been 'gardened' for 20 years, although gardening wasn't the priority at that stage in our lives. It was the era of 'The Good Life' (we already had a pig!). As a 'stay at home mum' with small children, I was keen to enter into village life. I joined the Flower Club.

Of course, the first thing a floral arranger does when budgets are tight is aim to grow all the foliage material needed, and many useful plants were acquired as gifts from new friends. One thing I was not given was the highly desirable *Eucalyptus gunnii*, most popular at the time with florists and readily available in garden centres for a very modest sum. I bought one, planted it alongside what was then the drive, and waited for it to produce the distinctive, silvery, artistic foliage. I was unaware that it needed regular cutting back to achieve this growth and, needless to say, I was never to use it for its intended purpose. 30 years later, it was the centre-point of our 2-acre NGS Open Garden!

Our specimen was quite at home in its surroundings and easily withstood the regular high winds to which we were subjected, at an altitude of 900ft. This fact alone would have won my admiration; after all it was a tree I associated with exotic climes. But add to this the interesting bark, and the way this peeled off revealing the new pink-orange bark beneath, together with the obscure flowers and delicate seed pods, and my interest was assured. We even found seedlings which had germinated nearby; an unusual item for the plant sales table!

The wonderful bark-effects seen in many examples in the genus, is what creates their 'garden worthiness'. I will never forget the sight of a mature specimen of *Eucalyptus pauciflora* subsp. *niphophila*, the snowy white bark of its trunk drawing the eye across an expanse of lawn and emphasising the scale of the place. This was in a large garden, visited on a coach trip with my village gardening club (I cannot recall which garden, as it was at least two decades ago). The tree was not only well placed, but the branches bent in a very dramatic way - asking to be climbed! Unfortunately, this was before I visited gardens armed with a camera, so I don't have a photograph of it. The seed-growing bug was already well established in me, so I did make a couple of attempts at growing one from seed. I soon accepted failure, realising that I would not live long enough to see it at maturity. Besides, already a plantaholic, there was so much else I wanted to try.

Everyone will be familiar with encountering different types of eucalyptus during foreign holidays. One outstanding example was during our visit to Costa Rica. Our guide was proud to draw our attention to the rows of mature 'Rainbow Eucalyptus' planted in the park areas of San José. This, he said, was the national tree and he, at least, was very proud of them. One cannot deny that the bark effects are quite stunning, seen here planted by the main pathway of a coffee plantation [photo p.2]. When I think back to this holiday, amongst all the wonders we saw, probably the first that comes to mind is these trees (followed by the horrendous downpour which followed!).

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Rainbow Eucalyptus
(*Eucalyptus deglupta*)

Another holiday encounter was in Madeira. During our visit in autumn 2012, the various levada walks we went on all seemed to go through wooded areas which were mostly of two types of eucalyptus. The plantaholic in me couldn't resist collecting seed from these, which were duly planted on arrival back home. Reasoning that it was no use growing them if they didn't survive our winter, the pots were kept outside. I was surprised and delighted that they germinated. With the pressures of preparing the garden for opening, and producing the vast quantities of plants that our visitors were keen to buy, the eucalyptus seedlings were somewhat neglected.

However, two years later when we moved to Lea [near Matlock], I brought with us the one remaining very strong-growing seedling of the variety I called 'Pod with Cap' (having distinguished the two sorts by the shape of the seed pods). This was one of the earliest plants to be given a home in our new garden last autumn, and it's doing very well. By the end of July the specimen was already 5ft tall, having put on a growth spurt during the summer. It must be happy.

How long it will escape the log burner remains to be seen! So far, I am not too enamoured with the large, floppy leaves and its lax habit but I will keep at it with the secateurs and give it a few years to redeem itself, before the master of the house is let loose with the chainsaw!

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