

Try something different from down under

Jeremy Spon

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Fig. 1 *Eucalyptus pauciflora* ssp. *debeuzevillei*

I am aware that in setting out to persuade members to try and grow some Australian plants in their gardens, I am pushing at the boundaries of the concept of the 'hardy plant' (especially writing after one of the worst winters since 1963).

It is fair to say that the number of Australian herbaceous perennials that can be grown outdoors in most of our gardens can be counted on the fingers of one hand. You may well already grow *Parahebe perfoliata*, which is remarkably tolerant of extremes of hot and cold, wet and dry. One that is less familiar, but equally beautiful, is *Diplarhena latifolia*, an iris relative, with white flowers whose inner petals are marked with purple and yellow; it is likely to suffer no more than leaf-tip damage in most winters. Two reliable front-of-border or rock garden plants are

Brachyscome rigidula, with purple daisy flowers throughout summer and autumn, and *Pelargonium rodneyanum*. Beyond these, I am struggling.

But even the smallest gardens need one or two trees and shrubs, and if you are looking for something a bit different, well Australia can certainly provide that. Different in foliage, different in form, different in flower; the first Europeans to see the Australian flora could scarcely believe how strange it seemed, and even today plants from that continent bring an undeniably exotic look to British gardens. Whether you approve of that exoticism is a matter of taste; I recall reading an Australian's condemnation of the planting of *Eucalyptus* in Britain on the grounds that they are too alien! But equally, it could be argued that the majority of our garden plants are exotic, in the sense that they are non-native – so why allow Chinese or North American plants, but not those from down under? And there is no question that Australian plants bring textures and forms, of leaf and flower, not

found in plants from anywhere else in the world.

So to some general observations. The first is that virtually all Australian trees and shrubs are evergreens, which means that those hardy enough to grow outdoors here are a valuable asset in providing foliage mass and interest in winter. The second is that, unfortunately, only a small proportion of Australian plants will survive winters here in open ground. However, among them are a number of very beautiful species with spectacular flowers, fascinating leaf forms and colours, or striking bark. Most are also pretty drought-tolerant, even those, like some species of *Callistemon* (bottle-brushes), which in the wild grow in stream-beds or swampy areas.



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Fig. 2 *Eucalyptus pauciflora* ssp. *niphophila*

This makes them ideal for those parts of the country, like the South East where I live, where winters are relatively mild, but summers can often have long dry spells. I have certainly never had to water my Australian plants, even in the hottest driest weather. It should be borne in mind that my corner of England does not suffer the extreme low winter temperatures experienced further north but, having said that, many of the plants described have been grown successfully in, for instance, Sheffield.

The iconic Australian plant has to be the gum tree. There are several hundred species of *Eucalyptus*; it is interesting to note that as recently as 1971, Mrs. Desmond Underwood in her classic *Grey and Silver Plants* treats all the species as unproven for hardiness, although beginning to be more widely planted. *E. gunnii*, by far the most widely available species, is now common all over the country, and often makes a huge specimen, so gum trees can hardly be said to be rare in Britain any more. However, this species is one of the least appropriate for most gardens, because of its size, and it is in any case by no means the most ornamental. Far better are the smaller multi-stemmed trees, known as mallees in Australia, with

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Fig. 3 *Callistemon subulatus*

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Fig. 4 *Callistemon viridiflorus*

ghostly white or multi-coloured bark, richly coloured new growth, and graceful habit. Species I would recommend include *E. archeri*, *E. coccifera*, *E. kybeanensis*, *E. nicholii*, *E. parvifolia* and the two subspecies of *E. pauciflora*, *debeuzevillei* (fig. 1) and *niphophila* (fig. 2), both of which have particularly beautiful white stems. If you have a bit more space, *E. dalrympleana* and *E. urnigera* eventually make quite tall trees, but again have beautiful bark, and attractive new growth (silver in the case of *urnigera*, orange-red in *dalrympleana*.) Finally, bear in mind that many eucalyptus will stand repeated coppicing, which restricts their size, and promotes the production of juvenile foliage which can be very attractive for flower arranging (*E. perriniana* is particularly good for this.)

Moving on to shrubs, and some of the most exotic-looking in flower are the 'bottle-brushes', species of *Callistemon*. (Botanists in Australia have merged these into the genus *Melaleuca*, but as they are usually still listed under the old name in Britain, I will use it here.) There is quite a range of hardiness in this group, and unfortunately some of the most widely available forms are not the hardiest. *C. citrinus* 'Splendens', and *C. viminalis* 'Captain Cook' for instance, are regularly cut to the ground in winter here in

Kent; much hardier among the red-flowered forms is *C. subulatus* (fig. 3) (sometimes listed as *C. rigidus*).

Hardier still are three yellow-flowered species: *C. pallidus*, *C. pityoides* and *C. viridiflorus*. *Pallidus* has broader leaves than the others and richly reddish-bronze-coloured new growth in spring, while *viridiflorus* (fig. 4) has quite dense foliage and a good upright habit, with pretty lemon-yellow flowers (without the rather mousy scent of *pallidus*). *C. pityoides* has the densest growth of all, making it a good feature plant all year round, and it is often outstandingly floriferous. It hardly needs pruning, but the other species can be cut back hard after flowering to

prevent their getting too big or leggy.

One minor criticism of *Callistemon* (although one that could be made of many other shrubs we grow) is that the flowering period can be quite short. The same cannot be said of *Grevillea*, in the Protea family. Several start flowering for me before Christmas, and are still going strong in mid-summer. Add to this the really unusual nature of the flowers, the brilliant colours, and the graceful habit, and you have plants that everyone who can grow them really ought to. An old favourite is *G.* 'Canberra Gem', a hybrid between two of the hardiest species, *juniperina* and *rosmarinifolia*, and seemingly harder than either parent. *G.* 'Olympic Flame' (fig. 5) is very similar but more vigorous; it has never been damaged in recent winters in my garden. *Juniperina* and *rosmarinifolia* are well worth trying, and a third species, *G. lanigera*, is also pretty hardy and has a useful prostrate habit. Finally, another hybrid, this time between *G. juniperina* and *G. thelemanniana*, certainly lives up to its name – *G. x semperflorens*. The flowers are a particularly pretty combination of pink and cream. This is more tender than the others, but it is certainly being grown outdoors in parts of the South East, and could be worth trying in sheltered spots elsewhere.

For something even more unusual, what about two other genera in the Protea family, *Hakea* and *Banksia*? The individual flowers of *H. microcarpa* (fig. 6) are not spectacular, but when they wreath the branches of a plant



Fig. 5 *Grevillea* Olympic Flame



Fig. 6 *Hakea microcarpa*

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Fig. 7 *Banksia marginata*

that otherwise looks like a small pine tree, the effect is quite extraordinary. *Banksia marginata* (fig. 7) has quite a long history of cultivation outdoors in the South and West, and a small tree at Apple Court in Hampshire, the former garden of Roger Grounds, although unlabelled, is probably this species. It had flowered profusely when I saw it in July last year, its flowering even more strange and distinctive than any of the plants mentioned so far!

Most Australian plants need full sun to thrive but *Lomatia myricoides*, another member of the Protea family, is better in partial shade (and really needs moist acid soil). The white flowers are sweetly scented, and produced on and off throughout summer. It would associate well with

Eucryphia lucida, which is almost as hardy as the much better known *Eucryphia x nymansensis* 'Nymansay', but with a much longer flowering period than the hybrid. Also tolerant of quite deep shade is *Drimys lanceolata* (fig. 8). This fine medium-sized shrub has lovely red stems, contrasting well with the shining, dark-green leaves, which have a distinctive pungent scent when crushed. Scent, this time of mint, is also a feature of the leaves of *Prostanthera cuneata* (fig. 9), the alpine mint-bush; it is a good rock- or gravel-garden plant and its flower display on a well-grown plant can also be spectacular.

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Fig. 8 *Drimys lanceolata* male

Also best in full sun, and needing shelter as it is vulnerable to wind-rock in the winter, is *Olearia phlogopappa*. The hardiest form has white flowers, but there are also pink and blue forms, raised in the 1930s by Harold Comber from seed collected in Tasmania. When first shown at Chelsea in 1932, these forms were mistaken by many for out-of-season michaelmas daisies, which

gives some idea of how spectacular they are. Some forms are pleasantly scented as well, but over the years names have become rather muddled, so it is best to buy plants in flower.

One of the largest genera in Australia, and rivalling *Eucalyptus* as a signature plant of the bush, is *Acacia*. The florist's mimosa, *A. dealbata* (fig. 10), is one of the most beautiful. It has a reputation for being tender but subspecies *subalpina*, which has the added advantage of being more compact

in growth, is hardy to at least -10°C . Unfortunately, the plants commonly seen in garden centres and mail order advertisements are almost always *dealbata*. There are, however, a few species which will tolerate much lower temperatures. One of the hardiest is *A. pataczekii*, a large shrub or small tree. As with many acacias, the leaves are replaced by modified petioles known as phyllodes, which gives them their distinctive appearance. The flowers, prolific in March and April, are mimosa-like. Less spectacular in flower, but even hardier and more compact in growth, is *A. alpina*; less hardy, but with a very graceful willowy habit, is *A. boormannii*. One of the most unusual in appearance, with almost triangular grey-green phyllodes close together all up the stems, is *A. pravissima*; it flowers profusely in March and April, and is pretty hardy. A friend reports success outside in a colder part of Kent with *A. rubida*. Finally *A. melanoxylon* and *A. longifolia* are both fast-growing and have grown well outside in the North West.

Another genus of shrubs which always provokes comment is *Correa*. Many are too tender to be grown outdoors, even with the shelter of a south-facing wall (although they make excellent conservatory plants),



Fig. 9 *Prostanthera cuneata*

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Fig. 10 *Acacia dealbata*

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Figs 11 & 12 *Ozothamnus ledifolius* in bud and in flower.

but two species, *alba* and *backhouseana*, will withstand -10°C . Their tubular, pendulous flowers, flared at the mouth, can be produced at any time between August and April, white in the case of *C. alba* and pale green in *C. backhouseana*.

Last, but not least, a plant that Jeff Irons, long-standing HPS member and founder and President of the Australasian Plant Society, says should be in every garden – *Ozothamnus ledifolius* (figs 11 & 12). It is certainly hard to beat as a foliage plant, with its yellowish ascending stems, and bright yellow new growth; the flowers are equally striking, creamy-white but terracotta in bud. Also with dark-red buds making an equally dramatic contrast to the woolly-white foliage, is *O. rosmarinifolius*.

In a short article it's possible to present only a tiny sample of just the Australian plants which can be grown outdoors somewhere in Britain, let alone the 13,000 or more species in the continent as a whole. But to anyone who likes a bit of a challenge, both in growing plants that might be a bit tender and in accommodating the strange and the exotic in their gardens, Australia has more than enough plants for a lifetime's interest!

Jeremy Spon continues to be drawn irresistibly to any plants out of the ordinary. He is secretary of the Australasian Plant Society; for more information, see www.anzplantsoc.org.uk or contact Jeremy on 01227 780038.