FRIENDS of KINGS PARK

Native Plant Notes

Growing Western Australian Native Plants

Growing Western Australian native plants can be rewarding and enhance both small townhouse gardens through to larger landscaped areas. In addition, many smaller plants thrive in well drained pots in courtyards and balconies.

Many people mistakenly believe that Western Australian flowering plants are either too difficult to grow or can be neglected because they are native.

Most benefit from standard horticultural practices and with good planning, native plants can be integrated with exotic species to achieve a structured, balanced and distinct aesthetic in home gardens.

The following tips for growing WA native plants will help ensure attractive, healthy and pest and disease resistant gardens.



Banksia menziesii. ***(Photo: Sue Jaggar)***

Preparing the Soil

Many Australian native plants, particularly those native to Western Australia, grow far better when the soil is improved with organic conditioners and slow-release fertiliser. The contrast between bushland, where plants often only survive, and a garden where they truly thrive can be striking. Although soil improvement won't change the soil's natural pH, it's usually best to work with what you have.

Accept alkaline or acidic soil as it is and choose plants that suit those conditions. Most garden centres can perform a quick pH test if you bring in a soil sample.

If you want to grow species that need very specific soil types, consider using containers.

Pots allow you to control the growing environment more easily, especially when using a high-quality, free-draining potting mix.

When establishing a garden in a new housing estate, it's worth checking the history of your block. Former market-garden sites often have soil with high phosphorus levels, which many Australian natives cannot tolerate. Staff at nurseries specialising in Australian plants can recommend varieties that cope well with phosphorus-rich soils.



Eucalyptus erythrocorys ***(Photo: Max Crowhurst)***

Soil Wetting

Western Australian sandy soils are often water-repellent (hydrophobic). Instead of soaking in, water can pool on the surface or run off, preventing moisture from reaching the plant's root zone below.

If your garden soil is water-repellent, applying a non-ionic soil wetter or wetting agent can help.

These products break down the waxy coating on soil particles, allowing water to penetrate evenly into the subsurface and reach the roots more effectively.



Pimelea physodes ***(Photo:Sue Jagger).***

Planting and Watering

Western Australian native species should be **planted from autumn to early spring for best results**. However, with extra care they can be planted year-round. Select young, non-rootbound plants and water after planting, and weekly through the first summer. Dry area species usually need no irrigation after establishment, relying only on winter rainfall.

Not all Western Australian plants are drought-tolerant, so confirm water needs with your garden centre, especially during the first year.

Subsurface trickle irrigation or hand watering is recommended to minimise evaporation; overhead sprinklers can cause fungal diseases unless used sparingly, especially for Myrtaceae. Overwatering, particularly in dry regions, can harm or kill arid zone species.

Mulching

Although mulching is not essential for most Australian native plants to flourish, it does contribute to reducing evaporation and maintaining cooler soil temperatures.

Mulch also serves an aesthetic purpose by enhancing the visual appeal of the garden and controlling weeds.

Utilize organic mulch, such as wood chips or composted (aged) leaf litter, to decrease evaporation and improve soil health. As mulch decomposes, it adds organic matter to the soil.

Apply approximately 50 millimetres of mulch, ensuring that it is kept away from the base of the plant. Excessive mulch can suffocate the soil and be detrimental to plant health. Always procure high-quality mulch from a reputable and accredited source to ensure it does not contain fungal diseases. Make sure it has been heat treated before buying. This avoids the threat of introducing the Polyphagous Shothole Borer (*Euwallacea fornicatus*), an invasive beetle species endemic to the Perth region.



Woody Mulch ***(Photo: Max Crowhurst)***

A native ground cover plant such as a prostrate *Thryptomene sp.* can serve as a living alternative to conventional mulch if you are patient while it grows and spreads.
Stones and strategically placed rocks can also act as mulch and are beneficial for dry area plants that prefer less humidity around them.

Fertilising

Western Australian native plants need minimal fertiliser but will benefit from slow-release types applied in autumn and spring.
Over-fertilising can lead to excessive growth, attracting pests and diseases, especially in kangaroo paws.

For phosphorus-sensitive genera such as banksias, hakeas and grevilleas, use low phosphorus (<2% P) fertilisers formulated for use on Proteaceae species. General fertilisers with phosphorus can be used for tolerant genera, allowing them to be grown in combination with exotic plants.

Always read the label for fertiliser formulation and dosage recommendations, suitable for native plants and measure accurately, rather than guessing handfuls.

Managing Pests and Diseases

Many Western Australian plants have small leaves and flowers, or large flowers made of many tiny parts, which helps minimise visible damage from pests and diseases.

Australian plant growers typically avoid chemicals, relying instead on these plants' environmental advantages, such as attracting birds and beneficial insects for natural pest control.

Maintaining year-round flowering supports this balance. If a plant consistently suffers from pests or



Lobelia sp. ***(open Source)***

disease, prune it back hard (or remove it); most mature-rooted plants recover well. Dispose of diseased cuttings properly by placing the material in a bin.

Dieback from *Phytophthora cinnamomi* is common but not the only fungal threat, and many resistant species exist. Consult nursery staff for suitable options if dieback occurs.

Good garden hygiene prevents any fungal diseases being spread by pruning. Clean your pruners and loppers with methylated spirits after using them on a plant that you suspect might be infected, and this applies to exotics as well.

Do not exchange plants from your garden with those from other people's gardens.

Pruning

The decline of 1970s native gardens were mainly due to insufficient pruning, which left shrubs overgrown and misshapen. Many believed Australian plants could thrive without care - an assumption not made for exotic species.

To grow a neat, compact shrub, trim it early—even if you lose the first year's flowers. This will help it bloom fully the next year. Prune by one third each year after flowering to maintain its shape and vigour.

If you have mature WA native shrubs that have become straggly after some neglect, reshaping may be possible if the stems you want to prune still have some foliage. If a shrub is too woody and leafless at the pruning points, it likely won't produce new shoots there.

As a final option, cut it back to the base—many WA plants naturally regrow from the base after events like bushfires or grazing.

Light, regular pruning extends the blooming period of plants such as banksias and kangaroo paws. Remove spent flowers to encourage compact growth and new blooms—a method also used with roses!

Taking a Realistic Approach.

Some individuals assume that Western Australian plants require minimal care and further expect these species to thrive indefinitely due to their reputation for resilience.

Many WA plants thrive only for a limited time. While some shrubs and trees are long-lived, many herbaceous perennials should be treated as short-term and should be replaced regularly.



Anigozanthos flavidus yellow ***(Photo: Max Crowhurst)***

The red and green kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthos manglesii*) is typically grown as an annual. Hybrid kangaroo paws generally have a lifespan of three to four years, after which their growth tends to decline. Lechenaultia is often replaced after one or two years when its appearance changes.

Be aware that overwatering and over fertilising may shorten the life of Australian plants. They belong to an ancient flora that has never relied on outside help, and you can kill them with kindness by forcing them to grow at an unnatural rate, causing them to reach maturity and old age too soon.

Western Australia benefits from several specialist nurseries and garden centres focused on Australian and especially Western Australian, plants. The volunteer growing group within the "Friends of Kings Park" grow both common and rare WA varieties, selling them at quarterly plant sales.

Availability is not an issue. Do not remove plants from natural habitats, as this is illegal, it harms the environment and may spread pests and diseases to your garden.

What you see growing in the bush may be the same species that you see in a specialist nursery, but often it will not be the same form.

Plant selectors and breeders have introduced a wide range of Australian and Western Australian plants, including compact, dwarf, and prostrate varieties, as well as cultivars with larger flowers, diverse colours, and longer blooming periods. These options suit all garden styles, from cottage to formal to minimalist courtyards.

Happy Gardening!

Acknowledgements

These Plant** Notes were collaboratively developed by **the Growers and Horticultural Advice & Support teams** of the **Friends of Kings Park,

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