



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Australian Plants for Davis Gardens

A rainy day is perfect for a walk in the arboretum.

I learned long ago that plant people should never go to botanical gardens with non-plant people.

My father, upon arriving, would stroll briskly down the wide paths, eyes up at the horizon, admiring the general park-like atmosphere and treating it as though we were on an exercise course. After a quarter-mile or so he would look back, frowning with impatience, to see that my mother and I had progressed about a hundred feet.

“Come on!”

“But look! This thing is blooming! I’ve never seen this before! I need a picture!”

“At this rate we’ll be here all day!”

“And?”

Even my canine companion seems a little perplexed by my non-linear visits to these places.

Gardeners seeking inspiration in these cooler months should visit the arboretum. Just don’t take friends that have only passing interests in plants. You’re going to be zipping around like the many hummingbirds you’ll see, going off the path to find plant labels and stopping to photograph lovely flowers against the bilious green backdrop of the creek (that’s duckweed on the surface, nothing unusual).

For many years the east end was pretty moribund, mostly serving as a turnaround point on a vigorous walk. A few interesting plants were separated by long open spaces. Some that I remember from the 1970’s are still there and have become impressive specimens. There are stately eucalyptus trees. The weeping bottlebrush that spreads over the path is one of the largest I have ever seen. A ghostly gray *Melaleuca viminea* near the entrance has been there with basically no care for over forty years.

Thanks to the new GATEways development -- with its wide paths, exemplary plantings of low-water grasses, interpretive signs, and the startling arch-made-of-old-shovels -- the east end now rivals the other points of entry. It attracts pedestrians and bicyclists from the nearby shopping center and downtown. It’s level, there are comfortable places to sit, and there’s shade.

And it’s well worth a visit in this season as many of the plants from Australia are starting to come into bloom.



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If there's any place in the world from which we can learn about low-water plants, it's Australia. Much of that continent experienced severe drought, in what they call the Millennium Drought, from 1995 through 2009 with some areas lingering into 2012. There was devastating impact on agriculture and livestock production. Major cities embarked on desalination projects. Australians fundamentally changed the way they used water in their homes and landscapes.

Australian plants have come into our plant palette gradually over several decades. Specialty nurseries in California began to add grevilleas, hakeas, and more to their inventories after the 1970's drought. Banksias, with their huge flowers, became prized shrubs in Southern California and milder parts of the north state despite being very fussy about drainage. The UC Santa Cruz Arboretum extensively planted species from down under. Periodic major freezes, such as in 1972 and 1990, devastating as they were to some collections, gave us valuable information about the hardiness of new introductions.

In the late 1990's test plantings were begun that focused on low-water management of selected types of Australian plants, replicated in groups receiving irrigation down to as little as 20% of what a lawn would receive. Though I haven't seen any published results from those tests, horticulturists have observed that many species can thrive almost unirrigated here.

Ryan Deering, GATEways Horticulturist in charge of the Australian section, commented in an email that "I can say that the Australian plants we are growing typically are as drought-tough as our CA natives. Many of them are also a lot less finicky than the typical Ceanothus and manzanita cultivars that are commonly available."

Tried and true.

Some Australian plants, especially well-adapted to California's rainfall cycle, are already very familiar to California gardeners.

Bottlebrush (Callistemon)

The regular lemon bottlebrush is a big shrub with bright red flowers in cycles over many months. It's very sun and drought tolerant, and amenable to pruning. I've scarcely watered mine for the last few summers. There are a number of new varieties on the market now, including forms with very upright growth habit, and some with different color blooms.

But it's an old dwarf variety that's coming back in vogue. Little John, a tight, slow-growing shrub with a long bloom season, mixes well with lavender and



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rosemary, and ceanothus and manzanita. Hummingbirds and bees love the flowers of all callistemons.

A reliable ground cover

I am increasingly impressed by the vigor and toughness of *Myoporum parvifolium* (Aussie common name: Creeping boobialla) as a replacement for lawns in areas where you won't need to walk. One whole slope in the arboretum is covered with it.

Clean, green, drought tolerant, and fast. In a project I worked on recently, one-gallon size plants installed in May were six feet across by October. Little white flowers are a nice bonus. There are now four variants on the market which differ mainly in the size and tint of the foliage.

Other Aussies

Some recommendations from Ryan Deering:

“I've been growing Westringias in abundance and finding them very tough and reliable. We also love the Velvet Range kangaroo paws [*Anigozanthos*] for same reasons. *Acacia boormanii*, *covenyii*, and the low cultivars of *redolens* have also been excellent and very tough. Hakeas in general very tough with *H. suaveolens* very impressive. We've had surprising success with several *Prostantheras* and *Isopogons* too.”

Grevilleas.

The showiest Australian flowering shrubs are in the genus *Grevillea*. Specimens of Mason's Hybrid were in full bloom along the creek on my recent rainy walk. Hummingbirds were everywhere.

We really need some better common names for these versatile and attractive shrubs. Wikipedia gives us Spider flower, Toothbrush flower, and Silky oak. None of those do them justice. The flowers of grevilleas are in showy clusters of bright red, pink, or orange, with a strange flower structure that looks rather alien.

Notable for long season of bloom, heavy production of nectar that draws hummingbirds and many pollinators, many grevilleas are very drought tolerant. I have a planting of Pink Pearl that I stopped watering several years ago. It is dense enough to provide nesting sites for hummingbirds as well as a family of red foxes. Some have prickly foliage, some soft; the needle-shaped leaves of many resemble junipers, while others are flat-leaved. A few hug the ground, and one type commonly planted in California in the 1970's is a very large tree.



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With over 350 species to choose from, key questions as we assess any species or variety for use here are:

- whether it is cold hardy.
- whether it tolerates our water. Some varieties grown elsewhere in the state will show chronic iron deficiency in Davis due to our hard water.

The 1990 freeze really tested the limits of grevilleas all over northern California. Some very showy types are damaged or killed at just 28 to 30 degrees F. But many will be fine down to 25 degrees, and recover from even lower temperatures.

Luen Miller of Monterey Bay Nursery, who has tested grevilleas for many years, considers these the most reliable:

“**Austriflora Fanfare**, Poorinda Royal Mantle, Molongolo, **Lava Cascade**, Canberra Gem, **Pink Pearl**, Scarlet Sprite, Noellii, **Penola**, Mt. Tamboritha and Jade Mound. Those are the ones we have good experience on as far as heat/drought/soils, either Valley or inland SoCal conditions. Not all take heat PLUS drought PLUS bad soil, but they will at least take drought plus heat.” He considers Lava Cascade and Jade Mound hardy down to 15 degrees, possibly lower.

Ryan Deering comments that his favorites “are probably G. ‘Bonfire’, G. ‘Gilded Dragon’ (nice size and great red winter blooms on silver foliage), and G. ‘Mason’s Hybrid’ – surprisingly hardy and blooms heavily all year except after frost.”

Take care with phosphorus fertilizers.

Some species of Australian and South African plants, particularly in the family Proteaceae, evolved in very phosphorus-poor soils and are highly sensitive to that mineral. Their roots have unique structures that extract it, and applied fertilizers can overdose them, damaging leaves or killing the plants. This includes grevilleas, banksias, hakeas, and leucadendrons.

Like our native plants, these don’t need any fertilizer or compost in the hole at the time of planting.

Plant in just native soil, water until established, and then leave them alone. As they say down under: *no worries, mate! She’ll be right.*

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Australianplants/Callistemon%20with%20Grevillea%20at%20Putah%20Creek.jpg

Callistemon Little John with grevilleas in the background in the Australian/New Zealand Collection at the east end of the Arboretum. Both plant species shown bloom over a very long



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period and have great drought tolerance. The bright green coating on the water is just a late-season cover of duckweed.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Australianplants/Grevillea%20Masons%20Hybrid.jpg

Mason's Hybrid grevillea in full bloom on a recent rainy day. Hummingbirds were actively visiting the blossoms. Grevilleas produce copious nectar, which in their native Australia is harvested by birds called honeyeaters. Our native Anna's hummingbird, resident here through the winter, appreciate the flowers.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Australianplants/Grevillea%20lavandulacea%20penola.jpg

Grevillea lavandulacea penola has soft gray foliage that contrasts with the showy rosy-red flowers fall through spring. It is considered cold-hardy to 20 to 25 degrees F. Photo courtesy of Monterey Bay Nursery.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Australianplants/Grevillea%20Pink%20Pearl%20in%20Dixon.JPG

Grevillea Pink Pearl, a hybrid, has proven very tough for me on my rural property. Planted in the 1990's, my hedge is no longer irrigated and had endured temperatures in the low 20's with no damage. There is light bloom all year-around, and heavy bloom in winter and spring. Due to the prickly leaves and the density, hummingbirds and red foxes nest in it.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Australianplants/Myoporum%20parvifolium%203%20months.JPG

Shown here just three months after planting from one-gallon cans, *Myoporum parvifolium* is proving to be a drought-tolerant, fast-spreading dense ground cover for our area. Look for the slope covered with myoporum on the north side of Putah Creek in the Australian garden at the arboretum.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_Australianplants/Banksia%20integrifolia.JPG

You'll surely take a picture, and then look for the label. None to be found! This is *Banksia integrifolia*. Another species is on the other side of the creek. Most banksias aren't hardy enough for our area, but evidently these are. Availability may be a problem; hardly any nurseries grow banksias in northern California.