

N E W S L E T T E R

PLANTS OF TASMANIA

NURSERY AND GARDENS

65 HALL ST RIDGEWAY 7054

OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK

9am-5pm (Winter 9am-4pm)

(Closed Christmas day, Boxing day, Good Friday, and Targa afternoon)

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Newsletter 11 Autumn 2003

Hello horticulturalists and appreciators of fine Tasmanian plants,

Tis autumn, and after our hot dry, dry summer, we've at last had heaps of rain, and the paddocks of Ridgeway are **so green, they're unreal**. It's a bit cool a bit quick though - I do hope we have some weeks yet of glorious sunny, still, autumn days.

Once again, it's a fine time to be planting. And it's a fine time to be selecting from our autumn collection - the majority of our new stock is in tip-top condition - just waiting to go to good homes. And if you don't have a good home, don't worry, these plants will improve it anyway - what's more, you could always plant out someone else's home - think of that warm inner glow, from such an act of kindness!

I've heard **two interesting stories** from customers this week. One is a method to deter rabbits - apply Vicks vapour rub to the stems of your young plants, and for bushy and ground-covering things, dab a bit on stones placed round the plant. The second story was from a customer who was building a new house. She has documentation from the council concerned, asking her to avoid planting bird attracting plants, in case they should injure themselves by flying into her windows!

Interesting. This would cut out about 99% of the world's flora. I hope this is not the start of a trend - I might have to find a new job. I propose instead that **we require houses to be built without windows** - save the birds I say! And what about cats - do we have any documentation on the relative detrimental effect on birds, of a pane of glass, versus the furry feline?

Even though this suggestion of not having bird attracting plants because of windows seems completely over the top, it is an issue to consider, and there are ways to minimise the problem. Having **really dirty windows** is one of the best! Personally, I prefer to train my birds. At our place we have a half hour lesson with our local birds after breakfast every second day. Along with our local introduced kookaburras and our bird chasing dog, we don't seem to have much window trouble.

I wonder if there's any natural selection going on? Maybe in any given bird population there are some in the tribe who can recognise a window for what it is (maybe they hit it at half pace last year) and pass on either their knowledge, or their excellent **'window-awareness' genes**, to their offspring.

I wonder also about those unfortunate animals who wander on to the roads at night. They've only been subject to really fast moving vehicles for 50 years or so - how many in a population have had a close shave and learned from it, to then pass the knowledge on, and how many are extra cautious and may pass

on that tendency to their offspring? Maybe, given enough generations, this danger will be recognised, and we will see less carnage on the roads.

But back to birds. Birds is the main topic for this newsletter. Staff member, Paulette, volunteered to write a spiel on birds and gardens, and has approached the theme in a way which I'm sure you will all enjoy. We will encourage you to think about how you can develop a bird attracting and friendly garden, so that you can view them happily from your dirty windows. But just before the birds, let me tell you about some new plants we have out for sale this autumn, and I'm sure they're all attractive to birds. (*I spent most of my youth trying to be attractive to birds - abject failure, I can tell you*).

***Cryptandra amara* Sweet Winter Cryptandra** Now we don't have many of these, (they have been most uncooperative on the propagation side of things), so you'll have to be quick. They are little gems, winter flowering and scented, but I'm not sure how reliable in the garden. \$8.50.

***Ricinocarpus pinifolius* Wedding Bush** Another gem, not so small - up to about 1.2m, and we've got more of these! However, also not a big record as being really reliable in the garden. Best in a sandy or light, well drained site - they grow round the Coles Bay area, to give you an indication. A soft foliated shrub with an outstanding display of creamy white flowers in spring. \$4.50.

***Bellendenia montana* Mountain Rocket** Back in stock again! What a beautiful plant. Alpine, so grow it in a cool, moist, well composted, well drained site (you got all that?) and it'll do its thing. We don't seem to get the red seed pods in these warmer climes, but the flowers, and lesser coloured pods are still nice, to go with the red stems and shapely leaves. \$4.50

***Melaleuca gibbosa* Hot Flush** What do you reckon, good name or not? I'll take your votes on this one. We haven't got them out for sale yet (sometime in spring), but they're a strong pink-purple (but more pink) in the flower. One of our customers spotted this one up the east coast. Thanks Tom. \$3.50

***Monotoca elliptica* Tall Coast-Monotoca** A large coastal shrub or small tree to 4m ish, with grey-green foliage and small white flowers. (Don't tell anyone, but our first batch of cuttings produced - after only two years - nice little trunks and magnificent root structure - had my bonsai antennae quivering). Good for coastal plantings too, I'm sure. \$4.50.

Birdscaping your garden

by Paulette

Birds aren't fussy. Like us, all they need is a safe place to sleep and raise their children, enough to eat and to be able to go about their business free from harassment and danger. When you are planning a new garden or changing an existing one with birds in mind, look around you. Birds and plants have evolved together over millions of years and have developed a trade agreement, where the plants provide food and shelter, in exchange for fertilising flowers, seed dispersal and pest removal services.

The Real Estate

Perhaps the worst thing we can do is jump in and go hell for leather ripping out weeds, raking up leaves and pruning dead branches from trees. While browsing my favourite bird book for inspiration I noticed that many of the pictures showed nests built in blackberry bushes. Why not attack them - and other unwanted dense foliage - a little at a time, and plant thick shrubs nearby, and give our feathered friends a chance to move at their leisure. Consider clearing these pesky plants in autumn and winter, when eggs are hatched and chicks are fledged.

The Ground Floor Even the smallest garden has room for a tussock or two. Plants such as *Lomandra* (Sagg) and *Poa* (Tussock Grass) provide snug nest sites for Wrens, Honeyeaters and Pipits, and native grasses are an important nest-building component for many other birds. Those of us lucky

enough to have a dam, creek or pond, can provide rushes or reeds in which Ducks, Grebes, Swans, Bitterns, Swamp Harriers and Native Hens raise their young.

The Shruburbs Perhaps the most densely populated form of avian housing is the shrub. For most, the more prickly and dense, the better. Many Hakeas, Teatrees, Grevilleas and prickly Wattles are well enough armoured to repel cats, and dense enough to provide privacy and make birds feel secure. The suburban garden has room for dozens of these bungalows, so why not pop a few in?

The Apartment Block Another extremely important, but hard to come by, piece of real estate is the tree hollow. Many species of birds and mammals depend on ready made hollows in which to raise their young, but in our pursuit of tidiness and 'safety', old dead trees are pruned or felled. The introduced Starling provides fierce competition for these homes and has been observed rolling Rosellas eggs from nests so it can move in. It takes up to ten years for a hollow to form after a tree loses a branch. Apart from putting away the chainsaw and showing our venerable trees the respect they deserve, we can create these apartments with nest boxes or hollow logs and branches, securely attached to younger trees.

The Penthouse For the nosy-neighbour birds, who like to see what is going on around them, old trees with dead crowns or big dead trees provide the perfect place to live. Perhaps our most majestic bird, the Wedge Tail Eagle (and many of its cousins) rarely live anywhere else. If you have room, plant a giant for your grandchildren.

The Others Some birds nest on beaches, embankments and cliffs, mudflats and in paddocks, and some make the most of human habitats. Bridges, sheds, retaining walls and even compost heaps provide great habitat for a variety of native birds. A male Pardalote dug himself a tunnel in the potting-bark pile at the nursery last spring, and after spending a week doing the interior decorating with soft shreds of stringy bark, he started to bring the girls around. One soon moved in, and the happy couple raised two chicks and moved on.

The Supermarket

Also like us, birds need a balanced diet. It may be tempting to put out feeding stations so that we can watch birds from the window, but they quickly become dependent on this takeaway, which can not only be unhealthy, but what happens when you move or take a holiday? (I'd rather they ate my aphids!) Honey eaters need insects for protein, Black Cockatoos will just as lustily rip the bark from a tree after a fat grub as much on a Banksia cone. When 'birdscaping' your garden, consider choosing a range of plants for a healthy, year round diet.

Lolly Aisle - Nectar. Perhaps the most requested bird plants are those to attract honey eaters. They are often the most visible feeders in the garden, and a posse of New Holland Honeyeaters feeding on a Banksia outside my kitchen window almost makes the washing-up bearable. With careful selection, you can have a garden where there are some plants flowering for most of the year. Tasmania also boasts the worlds largest honeyeater, the Yellow Wattle Bird who is often seen (and heard) in suburban gardens. As well as nectar from flowers, they feed on the sap of the Cider Gum, *Eucalyptus gumii*. A very special visitor to Tasmania is the Swift Parrot. They are a threatened species, with an estimated 1000 breeding pairs. They come here to breed in summer and their main food source is the nectar from the Tasmanian Blue Gum, *Eucalyptus globulus*, and when this fails to flower enough they turn to the Swamp Gum, *Eucalyptus ovata*.

Fruit and Veg. - Seeds and Berries. As well as a delight to the eye, autumn's bounty of berries and seeds are a bonanza for our feathered friends. Green Rosellas feast on the seeds of Rushes, Hopbushes and Teatrees, and on the spores of Treeferns. As well as a food source, Currawongs and others often swallow hard seeds to help 'chew' food in their crops. They can then regurgitate these seeds, which

have been softened by bird juices and are ready to grow. Many of our plants rely on this treatment to germinate.

The Butchery - Insects and Small Animals . Last week I had the privilege of watching the nursery's premier songbird, the Grey Shrike Thrush, make a meal of a Metallic Skink. Providing habitat, like rocks for skinks to bask on, a pond for tadpoles, or a layer of mulch for invertebrates like caterpillars and crickets, is a great start. Superb Fairy Wrens patrol the nursery cleaning up aphids and scale, and the Thrushes do a great job on the caterpillars.

The Nature Conservation Branch told me that the most important tree for providing insect forage for birds is the White Gum, *Eucalyptus viminalis*. Not only does it support a variety of insects for a range of birds, but a tiny, endemic, endangered bird, the Forty Spotted Pardalote, depends for food on the sugary secretions of a tiny lerp, that lives on White Gums. All plants play host to some kind of insect.

Remember that what you don't do is equally as important. Robins all but disappeared from the USA and Britain in the 1950's, because their appetite for insects tainted with pesticides, led to them building up toxins, and being unable to lay eggs with shells. Put away the snail bait, try not to net the cherry tree any longer than needed, and please do something about those cats.

From Paulette's article, you can see that it's not just Honeyeaters that we need to provide for in the garden. Every second customer asking for bird attracting plants, is after Grevilleas. They indeed do indeed have a great reputation for attracting Honeyeaters, and many of them are thick and bushy, thereby providing great habitat for small birds. However there is only one Grevillea species that is naturally occurring in Tasmania, *Grevillea australis*, and the small scented flowers are too small for Honeyeaters. Whatsmore, about 90% of Tasmania's flora appears to flower in spring and summer. Tasmania's birds were obviously quite happily existing before European settlement, and not at all concerned with a lack of Grevilleas or autumn/winter flowering plants!

As Paulette has pointed out, there are many other food sources for birds. In our gardens we tend to favour shrubs, but grasses and other tufty plants are obviously very useful for their seeds. Landscaping with grasses/tufties can be a bit of a challenge if you're not used to that look in the garden, however there are two distinct styles that can work very well.

One is the natural looking grassland style, which for me, invokes memories of tree trunks rising out of a grassy patch. This look can be created in a corner, or a section of the garden with a path wandering through. The planting can be enriched with other small native plants and groundcovers. Also rocks. Another distinct style is to use grasses/tufties formally, for example, along both sides of a path, or to border a paved area. It is quite simple to plant different species in layers for effect. It can be a nice look, and the birds probably don't mind which way you arrange them! Anyway, the greater the diversity of habitats in your garden, the more likely you are to have a range of birds, either in residence or visiting.

And speaking of visiting, if not all the birds come to visit you, you are invited to visit them. I was lucky enough to be having a daywalk near Lake St Claire in late April, on one of those classic, still autumn days when the air is as crisp and flavourful as a lightly chilled chardonnay - the valley resonated off and on during the day to the unmistakable, clear, clarion call of the endemic Black Currawong!

Magnificent!

And on that note
So endeth this screed

May the cooler months treat you well, and may you not have to forage for food, for too long in the cold wind and rain.....

Cheers for now, **Will** and trusty staff, **Lydia, Paulette, Sam, Dave and Lindy.**