

Local, Native or Exotic?



Brian Sams

MAIH – Toowoomba
Horticulturist

There is an almost religious debate that breaks out among planty types regarding whether only native, indigenous or endemic plants should be planted by our landscapers, councils and gardeners. This debate has been brought into even sharper focus with water restrictions in place in many areas in Australia.

So what are the definitions and why the argument?

An **Australian native** plant is said to be a plant that grows naturally anywhere in Australia. This sounds pretty straight forward until you consider the movement of plants across state and climatic borders of Australia. For example some species from the genera *Ficus*, *Syzygium* and *Murraya* are growing on islands in the Torres Strait and in New Guinea and also in North Queensland. Are they introduced, exotic or native plants?

An **indigenous** plant is a plant that is native to a particular region or regions in Australia. Again there are numerous Australian species from many genera that are now growing in many locations where they do not appear to have been growing prior to European settlement. Burning bushland areas by indigenous people and natural burning have changed the distribution of plants and diversity over the millennia.

An **endemic** plant can be defined as a plant that is native to a particular region and only that region. However, experts do not always agree on what a region actually means for example one source may regard a region very narrowly while others may include large areas such as the entire continent.

Therefore an endemic plant may be an indigenous plant and is certainly a native plant unless it is from somewhere else as outlined above. Clear?



Above: Home gardeners may select plants more for functional aesthetics rather than environmental sensibility. **Below (L to R):** *Nymphaea* – waterlilies can be found in water courses across Australia – does that make them endemic, indigenous or just native? An improved version of a native plant – *Grevillea* 'Robyn Gordon'.



It would seem to be more sensible to use the terms Australian native plant if the plant seems to belong to our island continent and local native plant if the plant has been shown to grow in a particular region prior to European settlement.

The arguments for growing native plants, and in particular local native plants, are quite compelling. Local plants are obviously adapted over a long period of time for the local climate, soil conditions and available water. Local plants provide a sense of place for each location where they are planted.

In a world of homogeneous cities and towns, ubiquitous uniform popular culture and as a sense of sameness that has spread throughout the country (including international sameness), it is the local plants that can help to provide a point of difference.

Local animals of all shapes and sizes are adapted to local plants. Planting of local plants provides the habitat for our local creatures. Local plants are unlikely to become weedy as some plants from overseas, or some from other regions within Australia, have.

Against all of these seemingly strong reasons for growing local plants you might consider the following...

Many private gardeners do not see the garden as an extension of the natural habitat at all. Rather it is an extension of their home, of their lifestyle and of their persona. The carefully trimmed hedges of whatever is fashionable, the agaves in pots, the Tuscan water feature and the mondo grass edge fit the house perfectly and their sense of what a garden actually is. To others it is a chance to create an oasis that is a reflection of their personal taste, their history and experiences.

Fashion, function, television and other media have a greater influence on plant selection and garden design than any notion of the total Australian landscape or local environmental issues.

You may argue that people could have a more positive impact on the local environment by lobbying to ensure urban and rural development allows for adequate shelter belts, natural reserves, wildlife corridors and national parks. This approach is only successful if they are adequately funded for both declaration and maintenance. Local councils, developers and state governments could be urged to have a far greater impact on the ambience, both natural and aesthetic, of our built landscapes. Street trees, local parks and nature reserves can all be used to create a sense of place.

The idea that local native plants are best suited for local conditions is worth examining in more detail. Certainly in natural setting local plants are best suited for local conditions. However, the conditions provided in an average home or unit site are anything but natural. The effects of the building process on soil, drainage patterns, water infiltration, sunlight, wind speed and direction and frost patterns are significant. Many gardeners then change the area further with additional mulching, watering, fertilising and pruning. This ensures that a garden in a given location will almost never be natural.

To make a truly natural garden in a built up urban environment requires unnatural effort! Given this altered plant environment it seems logical that plants from other parts of Australia and other parts of the world may actually be as suitable or more suited in many urban environments than some local native plants.

A blend of native and exotic plants to create the cottage garden style.



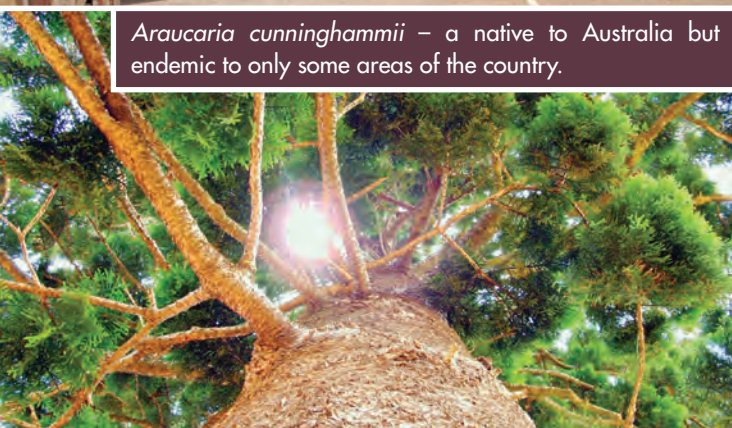
A popular native for birds and council planting programs.



Mix natives with exotics to create a better landscape suited to the site.



Araucaria cunninghamii – a native to Australia but endemic to only some areas of the country.



A new home generally creates an artificial environment around. Will local indigenous plants be the most successful on this new property?



Buckinghamia celsissima.



There is no doubt that in most areas of populated Australia there are enough local plants to achieve almost any effect that you may want in a garden. However, in most places you would be hard pressed to buy them. Walk into most garden centres, hardware stores and markets and you will be overwhelmed by a seemingly huge choice of plant material. But there will not be too many locals there. If they are there, they are likely to be smaller plants presented in forestry tubes without much fanfare.

The economics for commercial nurseries means that it is usually not viable to produce an attractive range of local plants compared to other lines. As a consequence the more popular lines, be they Australian native plants or exotic plants, are those that can be marketed in a range of locations, present well in pots, are fast growing and those plants that are well known to the public. Obscure local natives, even those with horticultural merit and potential, find it hard to compete. For many people plants are consumer products. Brand recognition, fashion, packaging and price have a far greater influence on plant selection than anything else.

If a greater range of native plants, including local native plants, are to be introduced into the palette of plants available, it will be as a result of a number of factors. Local plants need to be trialed and assessed in public parks and gardens. Local plant enthusiasts need to push their benefits while acknowledging their limitations. The plants themselves need to be attractive and commercially viable for nurseries to grow.

In preparing this article I have read quite a number of pieces by garden designers and native plant gurus that imply that Australian gardeners have got it wrong. Purists argue that people need to be educated on the benefits of using native plants to create a unique Australian gardening style. They argue that the general public has no idea as to what constitutes a true Australian garden in the twenty first century. Does the general public really care? I suspect the general public could not care less. Garden styles are emerging that do reflect the view of the people who matter most – the gardeners themselves.

Modern courtyard gardens, cottage gardens, purely native gardens, blue and white gardens, boring gardens, concrete gardens with gnomes and every other style will continue to be created. Whether people choose to use native, local or exotic plants in these gardens will be a matter more for fashion and personal taste than philosophy or ecology. 🌿