

Publishing our plants

An excerpt from Richard Aitken's stylish new book, *Botanical Riches: stories of botanical exploration* – a magnificently illustrated account of the travels of intrepid plant hunters and botanists.

Australasian plants had become available through the British nursery trade from the early 1770s, but it was the arrival of the First Fleet and British colonisation of Australia from 1788 that provided the critical impetus for a two-way flow of plants. The late eighteenth century also witnessed a fascination for southern Africa's ericaceous and proteaceous flora, and its requirements in the Northern Hemisphere for the dry heat of the stovehouse also suited the flora of New Holland. As more and more 'New Holland exotics' were introduced to Europe, so too did

their illustrations increasingly appear in published works. William Curtis and Henry Andrews both figured many Australian plants in their respective periodicals, the *Botanical Magazine and Botanist's Repository*, and during 1793–95 English botanist James Edward Smith published *A Specimen of the Botany of New Holland*, the first monograph on the Australian flora. These and other early hand-coloured publications vividly highlighted species of *Banksia*, *Eucalyptus*, *Grevillea*, and a host of lesser-known genera, all

glowing with horticultural potential. Although shaded by British colonisation, the French persevered with their exploration of the South Pacific. Notable botanists included Jacques-Julien Labillardière, who

expression of gratitude for the hospitality extended by Banks and others to its author, Charles-Louis L'Héritier de Brutelle, on his visit to Kew. The books of Labillardière, including his *Novae Hollandiae plantarum specimen* (Paris, 1804–06), were based directly on his botanical voyages. Yet others depicted Australian plants growing in important French gardens, such as those of the Empress Josephine at Malmaison and Navarre, the Paris garden of botanist JM Cels, and in the state-run botanic garden, the *Jardin des Plantes*. These books fortuitously coincided with the career of Pierre-

Joseph Redouté and the great age of French stipple engraving, producing coloured impressions of great subtlety and beauty.

OPPOSITE: The exploration of Matthew Flinders during 1801–03 brought new detail to many parts of the Australian coast, just as the work of his botanist, Robert Brown, brought a great advance in knowledge of the Australian flora. Yet it was the published work of the voyage's artist Ferdinand Bauer, *Illustrationes Florae Novae Hollandiae* (London, 1813), that highlighted the horticultural potential of this flora. Many of the plants depicted honoured the greats of contemporary British horticulture – *Grevillea banksii*, for instance, commemorated Joseph Banks and Charles Greville, one of the founders (in 1804) of the Horticultural Society of London.



The showy red waratah (*Telopea speciosissima*) was featured in many early botanical books and periodicals, including the earliest separate flora of Australia – *A Specimen of the Botany of New Holland* (London, 1793–95). In this, the noted botanist-author James Edward Smith relied on paintings by convict artist Thomas Watling as well as dried herbarium specimens. The much less common illustration reproduced here is from the *Naturalist's Pocket Magazine* (London, 1798), anonymously compiled but perhaps also derived from Watling's original paintings.

sailed with Joseph-Antoine d'Entrecasteaux (1791–93), and Jean-Baptiste Leschenault de la Tour, who sailed with Nicolas Baudin (1800–03).

A small walled garden, established by the French in 1792 at Recherche Bay in Van Diemen's Land, remains an early and tangible legacy of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition. Returning with seeds and plants, the French soon outshone the British in their publications depicting the Australian flora.

The earliest – *Sertum Anglicum* (Paris, 1788–92) – was intended as an



Clianthus dampleri (now *Swainsona formosa*) was named to honour explorer William Dampier, who saw the plant in 1699 on the dry sandy islands of Dampier's Archipelago in north-western Australia. It was through seed collection during the great age of inland exploration in the first half of the nineteenth century, however, that the species was brought into horticulture. By 1858, when the Horticultural Society of London awarded a silver medal to Messrs Veitch and Sons for a flowering specimen, the celebrity of the plant was firmly established.

Continuing British exploration – including coastal mapping by Matthew Flinders that led to adoption of the name ‘Australia’ – yielded further plants of ornamental potential. Collaboration between botanist Robert Brown and artist Ferdinand Bauer, who travelled with Flinders (1801–03), resulted in Brown’s unillustrated *Prodromus* (1810) and Bauer’s *Illustrationes florae Novae Hollandiae* (1813), resplendent with magnificent hand-coloured plates.

Despite the botanical riches depicted in these French and British florilegia, botanists were gloomy in their assessment of the economic potential of the Australian flora. A perceived lack of edible plants was commonly cited, yet this belied the rich array of ‘bush tucker’ plants that had sustained Australia’s Aboriginals for thousands of years. So it was that Australia’s earliest colonial gardens focussed on sustenance, importing European agricultural and horticultural traditions along with familiar fruits and vegetables. Indeed, Australia’s earliest botanic garden, at Sydney, had its origin as a productive garden supplying the governor’s table.

By the 1820s, the Sydney Botanic Garden was the centre of a flourishing plant exchange network with botanic gardens around the world. Thouin in Paris, Hooker at Glasgow, and Wallich at Calcutta all enriched the Sydney garden – and themselves were the recipients of Australian plants from directors Charles Fraser and brothers Richard and Allan Cunningham. The burgeoning plant-nursery trade, led by Lee and Kennedy of Hammersmith, Loddiges and Sons of Hackney, and other London-based firms, also traded with colonial botanic gardens, with plants from the Cape and Australia enjoying a period of immense popularity. Yet the fashion for Australian plants was relatively short-lived. Fickle horticultural tastes and the growing interest in tropical plants

from the Americas, Africa, and Asia led to a decline – although not a complete halt – in their cultivation in European stovehouses. It was Henry Andrews who best captured the contemporary mood: ‘To New Holland we export criminals for our convenience and safety, and from thence import furs for our covering and flowers for our amusement. So far the balance of trade is in our favour.’

The pages of the various botanical periodicals, and part-works such as Robert Sweet’s *Flora Australasica* (London, 1827–28), continued to feature Australian flora, although in comparatively fewer numbers than during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Eucalyptus macrocarpa, for example, was promoted in Britain in the 1840s for its bold bluish foliage as well as its striking flowers. The Sturt desert pea (*Swainsona formosa*) – seen and figured by Dampier – was collected by



Despite a shift towards South American and other tropical plants, Australian plants continued to be grown in Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, especially in botanic gardens. *Eucalyptus macrocarpa* was raised at Kew in 1842 from seeds sent by James Drummond – a long-standing correspondent of William Hooker – from the fledgling Swan River Colony, on Australia’s western coast.

many mid-nineteenth-century botanical explorers, and achieved horticultural prominence when exhibited in 1858 by the Veitch nursery. This was coincidentally the decade when colonial horticulture made its greatest strides, fuelled by the wealth from gold rushes. By the decade’s end, each of Australia’s colonial capitals possessed a botanic garden, and a vigorous local publishing industry was producing botanical and horticultural works suited to local needs and budgets.

ILLUSTRATIONS:

Page 16 *The Naturalist’s Pocket Magazine; or complete cabinet of the curiosities and beauties of nature...*, volume 1, printed for Harrison, Cluse, and Co., London, 1798 (unpaginated spread depicting the ‘War-re-taw’).

Page 17 Ferdinand Bauer, *Illustrationes florae Novae Hollandiae...*, Auctorem, London, 1813 (plate 9).

Page 18 Curtis’s *Botanical Magazine*, volume 84, London, 1858 (detail from plate 505).

Page 19 Curtis’s *Botanical Magazine*, volume 73, London, 1847 (detail from plate 433).

Botanical Riches

Text and illustrations from

Botanical Riches: stories of botanical exploration (Melbourne University Publishing, \$59.95).

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