

Hawthorn

John Dwyer, AGHS Victoria



Hawthorn hedges, reproduced from *Country Houses of Tasmania* with the permission of Alice Bennett

Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna* Jacq or *C. oxyacantha* L. the taxonomy is uncertain, and there are many hybrids in cultivation) is a spiny, deciduous small tree or shrub, growing to about 10 m high, with numerous spines on branches. The white- or pink-scented flowers develop into small red fleshy fruit each containing one bony nutlet or seed. The common names include May, Quick, Whitethorn, Haw, Bread and Cheese Tree.

Hawthorn has been much loved in England and Ireland for hundreds of years. For example, F.G. Savage wrote in *The Flora & Folk Lore of Shakespeare* (1923), ‘Among all the beautiful spring and early summer flowering trees, the hawthorn must claim first place. Its masses of white flowers adorn almost every wood and hedgerow, the rich lasting fragrance and the early season when blossom may be found, are also features that combine to render it a general favourite.’

From Peter Wyse Jackson in *Ireland’s Generous Nature* (2014) we learn that hawthorn ‘is one of the most important small trees in Ireland and found abundantly throughout the country in hedges, fields, scrub, woodland edges and rocky places. Indeed, hawthorn is regarded as being the commonest tree in Ireland today.’ He writes ‘[i]n ancient Ireland hawthorn would have been used as a food source’, using the fruits or haws, and noting that the plant crops heavily, and that haw seeds have been found in excavations of Viking Dublin dating back more than 1000 years.

It is not only the mature fruits that have been a food source. The common names for hawthorn include ‘Bread and cheese’ referring to a common practice in England of

school children eating the little clusters of bursting buds when they first appear. The poet Ivor Gurney (1890-1937) celebrated the custom:

Hedges

‘Bread and cheese’ grow wild in the green time,
Children laugh and pick it, and I make my rhyme
For mere pleasure of seeing that so subtle play,
Of arms and various legs going every, any, other way.

And they turn and laugh for the unexpensiveness
Of country grocery and are pleased no less
Than hedge sparrows. Lessons will be easier taken,
For this gypsy chaffering, the hedge plucked and green shaken.



Hawthorn berries, image Francesca Beddie

In England, Ireland and continental Europe, a great deal of superstition has from very early times been connected to the hawthorn. Both Savage and Jackson provide many colourful examples. Hawthorn plays a significant part in Robert Graves *The White Goddess* (1948), an examination of poetic myth from ancient times. Brewer’s *Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* (1895) tells us that Athenian girls used to crown themselves with hawthorn flowers at weddings. The Romans considered it a charm against sorcery and placed leaves of it on the cradles of new-born infants. From *Mr Guilfoyle’s Shakespearian Botany* (2018) we learn of customs in Greece and Germany attributing sacred meanings to the plant. We also learn that the hawthorn is ‘the distinguishing badge of the royal house of Tudor. When Richard III was slain at Bosworth, his body was plundered of its armour and ornaments. The crown was hidden by a soldier in a Hawthorn bush, but was soon found and carried back to Lord Stanley, who, placing it on the head of his son-in-law, saluted him as King Henry VII. To commemorate this picturesque incident, the house of Tudor assumed the device of a crown in a bush of fruited Hawthorn.’

Botanical name

There has been some uncertainty as to the botanical name. Professor Ewart's *Flora of Victoria* (1930) lists *Crataegus oxycantha* L. as the white hawthorn and *C. monogyna* Jacq. as the red hawthorn. 'Both are grown as hedge and garden plants and are occasional escapes from cultivation.' Baron von Mueller in *Select Extra-tropical Plants* (1885) gave *C. monogyna* as a variety of *C. oxycantha*: 'The ordinary Hawthorn or White Thorn...Recorded here as one of the most eligible among deciduous hedge-plants, safe against pastoral animals. The wood is considered one of the best substitutes for boxwood by engravers. The flowers are much frequented by bees for honey.' But the *Flora Of Victoria* (1996) gives *C. monogyna* Jacq. for hawthorn, 'A widely cultivated hedge plant and ornamental that has become naturalized at a number of localities, particularly in riparian sites.'

Hedges

Hawthorn hedges have been part of the English landscape for more than 1000 years. The Haw or Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna* Jacq.), used in England from Saxon times to make impenetrable fences or hedges, and the oldest of the hedgerow trees, was named for its use in hedges. Hawthorns were not, of course, the only plants used in English hedges. Gorse, (*Ulex europaeus* L.) and Sweet Briar (*Rosa rubiginosa* L.) have long been components, together with Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa* L.), and Holly (*Ilex aquafolium* L.).



Hawthorn blossom, image David Wright Creative Commons (CC BY-2.0)

With the enclosure movement in England, carried out over centuries from the 12th to the 18th, hedges were used not just to enclose gardens, but around fields. Hoskins, in *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955), estimates that in 1700, about half the arable land in England was already enclosed, but about half was still in open field. He has spelled out in detail how the parliamentary enclosures of the 18th century transformed the English landscape. The planting of hedges, in particular of hawthorn was a feature of the enclosures. As Hoskins wrote, 'The new fields were hedged around with quickset, whitethorn, or hawthorn, to give its alternative names, with a shallow ditch on one side or both sides of the fence. In the upland stone country, dry-walling took the place of hedges.' According to Henry Stephens, who gave a detailed account of the procedure for establishing and maintaining Thorn Hedges in *The Book of the Farm* (1852), 'On account of the beauty and fragrance of its flowers, the hawthorn has been a favoured plant among all nations'.

Medicinal use

Mrs Grieve's *A Modern Herbal* (1998) gave as the medicinal usage of hawthorn 'Cardiac, diuretic, astringent, tonic. Mainly used as a cardiac tonic in organic and functional heart troubles. Both flowers and berries are astringent and useful in decoction to cure sore throats. A useful diuretic in dropsy and kidney troubles.' It is well established that hawthorn products are effective to treat cardiac insufficiency (van Wyk and Wink *Medicinal Plants of the World* 2005). According to Jackson, the first mention of its effect on the heart was by Quercetanus, the personal physician to King Henry IV of France (1553-1610).

Hawthorn in Australia and as a weed

It is not surprising that hawthorn was an early introduction to Australia. Daniel Bunce had it for sale in Hobart in 1836. Parsons and Cuthbertson note that it was advertised for sale in Adelaide in 1839, 'possibly having been introduced by the original European settlers of the South Australian colony in 1836.' They also refer to listings in the Camden Park (New South Wales) catalogues of 1843 and 1845 (*Noxious Weeds of Australia* [2001]). The 50 kilometres of 180-year-old hawthorn hedges in the grounds of Exton House in Tasmania give some indication of the extent of early introduction (Bennett and Warner *Country Houses of Tasmania* 2009).

Although an early introduction and in wide-scale use for hedges in Victoria, Tasmania and on the tablelands of New South Wales, hawthorn was slow to naturalise and was not included in Sir Joseph Hookers's list of naturalised plants of Australia (*Flora Tasmaniae* [1860]), nor Professor Ewart's *The Weeds, Poison Plants and Naturalized Aliens of Victoria* (1909). The 1925 *Supplement* to that work included *Crataegus oxaycantha* (sic) 'Common Hawthorn' in a list of 'Exotics Not Yet Sufficiently Established To Be Considered Naturalized'. Hawthorn was not included in Whittet's *Weeds* (1962), published by the NSW Department of Agriculture; nor in Lamp and Collet's *A Field Guide to Weeds in Australia* (1979).

Hawthorn was, however, listed in Black's *The Naturalised Flora of South Australia* (1909). The earliest record of its naturalization in Victoria that I have found was its inclusion in Ewart's *Flora of Victoria* (1930). It was not proclaimed as a noxious weed in Victoria until 1965, and then with an exception for existing hedges not exceeding 6 feet in height and 3 feet in width. Auld and Medd in *Weeds* (1987) described hawthorn as 'naturalised in south-eastern Australia and infest [ing] open grassland especially in colder areas. Dense thickets of hawthorn provide cover for vermin...' But they concluded on a positive note, even without acknowledging its beauty: 'However, the plants may provide stock shelter and vitamin C and the heart regulating agent cratinoaeolic acid have been extracted from the fruits and bark respectively.'

Kate Blood includes hawthorn in *Environmental Weeds* (2001), as invasive in 'Lowland grassland and grassy woodland, dry sclerophyll forest and woodland, damp sclerophyll forest, riparian vegetation, pasture, disturbed areas, roadsides and forest margins' in all states except NT and WA. She notes that it is 'coming back into fashion as a garden plant and in restoration of historical properties.' Muyt notes in *Bush Invaders of South-East Australia* (2001) 'In Tasmania many Hawthorn hedgerows are classified as having historic and cultural significance. In these cases hedgerows may need to be left standing despite being a source of invasion into nearby bushland...Hawthorn commonly provides habitat and food for smaller native

animals.’ He suggests staggered removal ‘over a number of years while establishing suitable habitat nearby.’ It may be suggested that the recognition of new ecosystems would be a preferable analysis here, and that the proposed removal of hawthorns adopted by native animals should be reconsidered.



Historic hedge in the Kyneton Botanical Gardens in winter, image Robin Marks

Some of the early hawthorn hedges now have heritage conservation status, such as the hedge in the Kyneton Botanic Gardens. The orchard at the heritage listed Werribee Park was surrounded by a hawthorn hedge but the hedge has not fared well, with only a single tree now surviving. This example seems somewhat at odds with the noxious weed status, which has, as it happens, been reduced to *C. monogyna* being a controlled weed in six regions.

Any discussion of hawthorn should consider whether there was any relationship between the plant and the naming of the suburb of Melbourne. Blake says in *Place Names of Victoria* that Surveyor Robert Hoddle called the district Hawthorne, but does not say why. There is a heritage listed house in Creswick Street called ‘The Hawthorns’; but although built in 1845, it only acquired that name in 1863. Hoddle (1794–1881) retired as Surveyor General in 1853. In *Land, Labour and Gold* (1855), William Howitt suggested that the place acquired the name because ‘blest, probably, with wattles and tea-scrub’ [and reminiscent of hawthorn].

Conclusion

As we have seen, hawthorn was in Australia and widely used in hedges and gardens for more than 100 years before anyone called it a weed. Its beauty and fragrance are likely, I think, to continue to find admirers who will cultivate it despite any propensity to escape.