

The Australians

By Birgitt Evans

Author's Note: In July and November 2009, I attended a symposium on Australian plants put on by The Garden Conservancy and The Ruth Bancroft Garden. This article is based on the lectures of Jo O'Connell, Laurence Nicklen, Dr. Glenn Keator, Melinda Krelj (of U.C. Santa Cruz) and Dr. Matt Ritter (of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo). Photos were taken at the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum.



Plants from Australia's Mediterranean regions, located in Western Australia around Perth and South Australia around Adelaide, are well suited for California gardens. They have been making their way here for more than 40 years. The first wave in the 1960s included bottlebrush (*Callistemon spp.*) and the next wave in the late 1980s brought us *Grevilleas* and the ubiquitous kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthos spp.*). We are in the midst of the third wave of introductions and nurserymen are bringing us a panoply of new plants such as *Correas*, *Westringias* and *Lomandras*.

Australian plants generally like well drained soil, so they should be grown on mounds or in raised beds if you have heavy clay soils. They also prefer acid or neutral soils so add soil sulphur to alkaline soils or if you need to correct chlorosis. One thing you will not want to add is phosphorus as *Proteas* are particularly sensitive to excess phosphorus in the soil. In fact, in most cases you will not need to add any fertilizer at all since Australian plants have large root systems and are adept at extracting nutrients from poor soils. What you will want to add twice a year is well broken down mulch from which your plants will extract the nutrients they need.

The Australians want little water once established and a monthly watering will usually suffice. Water in the evening or on cool days as you want to avoid warm, wet conditions which promote fungus. Most of these plants are hardy to 25 degrees F and a few will tolerate temperatures as low as 16 degrees.

With the exception of *Lomandras*, which look like bunch grasses and can be mown back to 6", you never want to prune off more than a third of your plants and you want to do your pruning in early summer. Otherwise Australian plants need little care and will reward you with stunning blooms which are very attractive to wildlife and with interesting foliage.

Fall and early spring are excellent times to plant drought tolerant plants like Australian natives.



Meet the Australians:

Banksias: The poster child of the family *Proteaceae*, the 170 species of Banksias are slow growing, medium to very large woody shrubs and trees. They produce large inflorescences of hundreds of yellow, red or pink blooms

which are heavy in nectar and highly attractive to birds, bees and bats and which are followed by attractive seed pods. Leaf form varies from pinnate to the most common serrated leaves.

Banksias need full sun and most prefer sandy soils.

Closely related to Banksias, **Dryandras** or “thistle flowers” produce shorter inflorescences in a variety of colors on generally smaller plants. They need well drained soils and are susceptible to root rot fungus.

Correas: Members of the *Rutaceae*, there are eleven species of Correas. They are low growing, evergreen shrubs with dark green leaves with gray undersides. Correas produce stalks of beautiful, small tubular flowers in pink to reddish orange over a long bloom season. Good in dry shade in cooler locations and will tolerate alkaline soil. Deer resistant.



Grevilleas: These members of the *Proteaceae* were featured in the Master Gardeners’ first Outstanding Plant List (http://ucanr.org/sites/MG_Alameda/files/37013.pdf). They come in a variety of forms, from low growing groundcovers to large woody shrubs and produce curved flowers in a variety of colors on inflorescences up to 8” long from fall into early summer. Hummingbirds love their flowers. Deer resistant.

Lomandras: The 50 species of Lomandras are in the family *Dasypogonaceae* and are unrelated to our bunchgrasses except in form and function, with the leaves originating in a central point. With a range of sizes and forms, foliage colors and textures, interesting flowers and general reliability, they are excellent in borders or as an accent next to Grevilleas. As mentioned, they can be mown back to 6” if they become leggy and they will come right back. They will take sun to part shade and prefer well drained soils.

Westringias: These dense, widespreading, fine-textured evergreen shrubs have green to gray-green, needlelike leaves and small white or lavender flowers from midwinter through early summer. They have a spreading, rather loose growth habit and prefer full sun and good drainage. Deer resistant.

That is just a tiny fraction of the many wonderful Australian plants available. Hopefully, you will be inspired to go out and add some to your garden.

Birgitt Evans is a University of California Master Gardener. For more information on Alameda County Master Gardeners, visit our newly redesigned website <http://groups.ucanr.org/ACMG/> and check out the page “Outstanding Plants for Alameda County”.