



Success with Growing Australian Plants

1 BUY HIGH QUALITY AUSTRALIAN PLANTS

Buy only from reputable garden centres with knowledgeable and trained staff. Contact your local Australian Plant Society for extra advice. (See links page for APS contact details.)

Garden Centres that specialise in Australian plants usually have a better range of interesting Australian plants than general nurseries.

See the list of nurseries and garden centres on this site.

2 WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN PLANTS

Well shaped plants without long bare stems. The plant should be reasonably bushy, not gangly and misshapen.

People like to buy plants in flower, but also look for fresh healthy new bud or leaf growth on plants rather than just the pretty flowers or the size of the plant.

Check mature leaves for yellowing, or leaves with dead spots or any evidence of problems. This may or may not be an issue as most Australian plants have remarkable resistance to problems and will grow away well when looked after properly.

Many people like instant gardens and prefer to buy large well sized plants in 250–400 mm pots. However these can take a little more effort to get established. They usually require extra staking, ground preparation and mulching, and in dry weather they will require diligent watering to get established.

As a rule it is much better to buy small plants in preference to larger plants. For garden conditions, plants in 150–200 mm pots generally grow away quicker with less effort than bigger plants.*

**If you are planting out large trees > 30-40 m mature height such as for a windbreak, then you are advised to use plants grown in forestry tubes to give the roots every chance to grow out from an early age to hold the tree securely.*

Be very careful with 'cheap' plants – they are discounted for a reason. If a plant is tall and overgrown for its pot size, it pays to gently knock the pot off to check the roots. If



they are white and healthy, the plant could be worth buying, but gently tease out the lowest roots before planting.

3 PLAN YOUR GARDEN

For a start ask yourself how sustainable do you want your garden to be and how much water do you want to use? This will influence what type of plants will be in your garden.

Be prepared to work with nature to avoid disappointment – its makes no sense to plant a rainforest plant in a desert unless you are prepared to spend a lot of time and money modifying your growing conditions.

Find out what conditions your plants like by checking what part of Australia they came from. If the plants naturally grow in hot dry conditions then find a warm place that gets full sun, summer and winter.

Be aware of the local climatic conditions, and look carefully at your own gardens' summer and winter microclimates – especially for the warm and cool, windy and protected areas. Also check for remnant bush near you to see what grows well there.

If you are careful with designing the garden in relation to the buildings, it can reduce your household energy use in terms of light, cooling and heating as well as help with fire resistance.

Many of Australia's best plants come from areas west of the Great Dividing Range. The humidity in this Central and Western area is generally lower than that of the heavily populated East Coast.

If you want to grow plants from these areas, find out where your garden has hot drier areas with plenty of air movement and plant them there.

Work with the seasons if possible. It is always better to plant in spring and autumn rather than winter and summer. If you want to get technical – check out moon planting times.

Be careful of planting under tall Eucalypts – many are shallow rooted and the roots extend as far as the leaf canopy. This leaves no moisture and little nutrients for other plants to grow with if you plant within this zone. With deeper rooted trees such as Red Gums, there are many under story plants that can be planted closer to the trunks.



If you are really serious you may want to get soil tests done to check pH and nutrient levels. With the expansion of suburbs into what was once fertile farmland, you may just end up with a residual oversupply of Phosphorus for sensitive plants.

Most Australian plants have adapted to drier root zones so they naturally prefer to have excellent drainage. **They can only stand so much water-logging before they are killed.**

Coarse free draining sandy loams seem to be the most versatile soil type for East Coast Australian gardens because this suits such a huge range of flowering plants. If you don't have this soil type you should be able to get near it by adding coarse sands, and any friable composted material to the topsoil.

If your garden has poor draining soils, this could mean breaking up the clay with gypsum, deep ripping drainage lines or making raised beds depending on the problem. Using grafted plants generally helps to solve this problem.

Even though many of these plants come from areas where the minimum temperatures are minus 4 – 6, many have an ability acclimatise to lower temperatures if planted well before winter. Some may require protection for severe frost for the first few years of their life.

Most Australian plants **need to be grown full sun positions**, avoiding known frost hollows and heavy shade. Check what summer and winter shade will apply, but winter shade is potentially the most damaging. Pay attention to micro-climates within the garden created by structures and existing plantings.

Most Australian plants like **good air movement and air drainage**, with ample space around each plant if the garden is not in a naturally windy area or on a slope.

There are many good books and information on garden design available.

4 HOW TO CARE FOR YOUR AUSTRALIAN PLANTS

Planting

- Dig your holes slightly bigger and deeper than the pot size.
- If the soil is dusty and dry, fill the holes with water one or two times and let it drain away completely. **
- It is also good to soak the pot in a bucket of water until the bubbles stop. This will also make it easier to get the plant root ball out of the pot.
- Place your hand over the top of the pot and gently invert the plant at the same time gently pulling the pot off without disturbing the roots or soil mix.

- Stir a handful of slow release Native Fertilizer (Low Phosphorus levels) into the loose soil from the hole and place enough of the mix back in the hole until the top of root ball is level or slightly above the natural soil level.
- Pack the rest of the mix around the root ball so it is level with the original soil surface.
- Then form a shallow dish (50 mm deep) around the drip line of the plant. Fill the depression with water to soak the area evenly several times at first. Use some seaweed plant food diluted appropriately at this stage.
- If it doesn't rain, keep the soil in the depression damp over the next few weeks until you see new growth coming.

***If the water does not drain easily from the holes (within 15-20 minutes), it is a sign of poor drainage. If planted in these conditions, the roots may eventually get waterlogged and rot.*

Most Australian plants prefer good root drainage, are used to extremes of wet and dry, but hate having their roots continually soggy and wet.

If you have poor drainage, it is best that the whole garden bed be built up with suitable free draining soil at least equal to the height of the pot depth. Deep ripping and treatment with Gypsum can help in many circumstances.

Also note that in extended rainy weather on the east coast, some Western Australian plants can literally drown because they are adapted to drier air and soil conditions.

Mulching

- To finish the planting, place mulch around the plant about 50 mm thick after removing any weeds.
- Make sure the actual trunk of the plant is kept free of mulch otherwise it may get too wet and rot.
- Hard mulches such as stones and woodchips are preferable to soft mulches such as grass or hay especially for grey leafed plants. Hard mulches tend to even out extremes of soil temperature if used thickly enough.
- Be guided by the natural habitat of the plant as to which mulch you use. Woodchip based mulches are the most versatile.

Staking

- Taller plants will come with a stake but these are designed for <6 months use. If the plant needs a support then replace it with a proper hardwood stake. There are many Velcro and rubber clipping systems available as well as hessian strips for ties.
- Generally it is better if the plant is allowed to grow without support to make the roots hold the plant.
- Staking is usually only necessary if the plant is to be grown in an exposed site or it is top heavy and carrying a lot of foliage. If it is top heavy then use three stakes carefully placed within the foliage to form a tripod. If tall and wispy then two or three stakes around the plant with plant ties as required.

Watering

- If you have made a depression around the plant this needs to be filled once or twice a week for the first 2-4 weeks after planting, depending on prevailing weather conditions.
- Long deep watering (1 hour once a fortnight) is much better than daily watering at only 5-10 minutes of watering at a time. Long deep watering encourages the roots of the plant to go deeper into the soil profile. If you give them short watering periods, the roots will grow close to the surface and be exposed to drying out quicker.
- If the weather is favourable no more watering may be required, but watch for signs of drooping leaves.
- Be guided by the natural habitat of the plant to work out a watering regime. This may mean some relearning as these plants ***will not respond well to conditions favourable to most exotic plants.***
- Most of the plants supplied from Tarrowood don't require watering after establishment unless extreme hot windy weather is experienced.
- In ground sprinkler systems scheduled to give regular weekly watering generally kill dry-land Australian plants, and should be avoided or only used very occasionally.
- Most Australian plants in garden situations prefer water to be applied to the root zone, not the leaves.
- Tarrowood's gardens receive no extra watering even during dry periods, including the last 10 years of below average rainfall.

Fertilizing

- Australian plants have adapted to low fertility soils and will grow without fertilizers. However most do respond well to fertilizers if they are the right type.
- Low phosphorus (P) and slow release Native Mixes (< 3% P) blends are available and should be used as directed on the label. Any fertilizer with over 4-5% Phosphorus should not be used. Don't use normal agricultural fertilizers as they tend to release their nutrients very quickly. Good quality slow release fertilizers release their nutrients gradually over a period of some months, which is better for Australian plants.
- However most Australian plants can handle > 10% Nitrogen (N) and Potassium (K).
- An annual topdressing of blood and bone or a slow release native fertilizer as per directions after flowering is always helpful. This is best lightly scratched in so it's mixed with the top 5-10 mm of soil – do not disturb the roots.

Pruning

- Most Australian plants respond very well to pruning and shaping. In the bush, insect and animal predation and fire does this continually. How often do you see a plant with the above ground part destroyed only to regrow completely later? However if left alone any Australian or exotic plant can grow leggy and misshapen.
- Tip prune when young, and don't be afraid to get out the chainsaw on bigger plants if they have gone woody. For example many grevilleas respond to drastic pruning every few years to keep their growth fresh. This may mean cutting everything off to a 300 mm-450 mm stump.
- Cutting plants back severely (up to half of the bush) each year after flowering generally keeps Australian plants healthier.
- It pays to take the centre out of some dense bushes if they show signs of getting moulds. This applies especially to dry-land plants growing in crowded suburban blocks.

Remember - more Australian plants are killed by kindness than by neglect.