

Home among the gum trees

While the sight and smells of Australia's iconic gum trees evoke stirrings of national pride, our Eucalyptus seem to have an image problem when it comes to our own backyard.

We love the thought of these iconic trees providing beauty and habitat for native wildlife in the suburbs but most homeowners don't want to plant one in their garden.

They complain that they are too big, inclined to shed big branches on homes or cars without warning, have aggressive tree roots that lift and smash paving and create work by continually dropping leaves into gutters.

The staff and volunteers at Perth's Kings Park and Botanic Gardens (KPBG) are concerned with the tree's poor image and want to change it. Their solution is to recommend and promote ten small West Australian eucalypts which are trouble free and perfect for small gardens.

These beautiful shrubs and small trees have fringed, gum flowers that attract nectar eating birds and mammals and most have beautiful ornamental buds nuts that hang on the tree long after the flowers have faded.

Rare trees

Senior Curator Grady Brand from KPBG said that other than *Eucalyptus beardiana* and *Eucalyptus brandiana*, which are rare in the wild and cultivation, the trees were commercially available. The rare species are being grown from seed collected at KPBG and are sold at special plant sales at the park.

Mr Brand said that *Eucalyptus caesia* was an example of a tree threatened in the wild which was now a common in gardens around Australia because of its beauty and compact size. He hoped that in 20 years time the other threatened species would also be widespread in gardens.

"These trees were primarily selected to grow well in Perth but will be OK in a sunny spot in well drained soils in southern regions of Australia," Mr Brand said.

"Gardeners with enough space should consider planting the trees out as a small grove of three or five. If you don't have much space these trees can also grow in large tubs for 10 to 20 years which is one of the reasons they were selected for the list."

He said the selection was chosen to reflect the huge biodiversity of Eucalyptus from the State's different regions.

Eucalyptus torquata and *Eucalyptus kruseana* comes from the Goldfields, *Eucalyptus beardiana* from the northern sand plains, *Eucalyptus preissiana* and *Eucalyptus brandiana* from the south coast, *Eucalyptus caesia* and *Eucalyptus macrocarpa subspecies elachantha* from the Wheatbelt, *Eucalyptus pyriformis* from the Wheatbelt and northern sandplains, *Eucalyptus kingsmillii* from the desert and *Eucalyptus victrix* from the North West floodplains.

KPBG has a printed map on its website, showing where they are growing in the park.

Planting

Water well at the time of planting and monitor the soil moisture. Trees should be watered during dry spells in winter and spring and get deep, twice weekly watering during their first summer and autumn. Thereafter, it should not be necessary to give extra water unless there is a prolonged dry spell.

Apply a slow-release 8-9 month native fertiliser at time of planting.

Top ten ornamental eucalypts

Silver princess (*Eucalyptus caesia*)

This graceful, weeping tree grows to 6m and has a silvery glow caused by a waxy bloom covering the young stems, grey-green leaves, buds and fruits.

Its attractive trunk has reddish brown bark curling back in flakes to reveal the vibrant colours of the new bark beneath.

Big flowers, up to 5cm wide, range from pink to red and are followed by silver gumnuts that provide year long interest. It responds to pruning by sending up multiple stems and its open habit enables small plants to grow beneath it.

Beard's mallee (*Eucalyptus beardiana*)

Listed as an endangered species in its habitat, this spreading tree grows to about 4m and has smooth grey or cream bark with a pinkish tinge.

Narrow grey-green leaves complement pendulous clusters of buds which shed beaked bud caps to reveal creamy-white flowers in late winter to early spring.

This tree is frost tolerant and likely to branch near the ground and become multi-trunked.

It is named for botanist Dr John Beard, a former Director of KPBG.

Square-fruited mallet (*Eucalyptus brandiana*)

The trunk of this mallet, which grows to 5m and has extraordinarily big leaves, flowers and fruits, is unusually square shaped when the tree is young.

Leaves are 20cm x 5cm, dark, glossy-green and leathery with a well-defined mid-rib. The buds take several months to develop in the leaf axils and are large, red and have prominent 'wings' at each corner.

The pyramid-shaped bud cap falls to reveal many, long pink flower stamens and the attractive square fruits are also winged.

While preferring a sunny spot, this species will tolerate shade, is endangered in the wild and is named for KPBG's senior curator Grady Brand.

Kingsmill's mallee (*Eucalyptus kingsmillii*)

This mallee has a variable form ranging from a compact 1.5m shrub to an irregular shaped tree to 4m tall.

Trees usually have a single trunk with rough lower bark and smooth upper branches.

The pink to red buds are prominently-ridged and open to pendulous 3cm cream to yellow flowers in clusters of three during autumn, winter and spring.

Coral gum (*Eucalyptus torquata*)

Grown for its unusually shaped red buds and abundant blossom, the coral gum is an excellent shade tree, growing 6m to 8m tall and 5m wide.

It starts flowering when young and blooms from winter to summer with pink or coral coloured flowers on reddish stems.

Trees are frost tolerant and the rough, greyish bark complements blue-green pendulous foliage.

Buds are prominently ribbed and make a good cut flower. The Latin word '*torquatus*' means 'adorned with a neck-chain or collar' and refers to the decorative ridge around the base of the pointed bud cap.

Bell-fruited mallee (*Eucalyptus preissiana*)

A shrub-like species growing to about 3m tall and 2m wide which flowers when young with 3cm yellow blossoms in autumn through to winter.

It has smooth bark, thick, stiff, grey-green leaves and flowers are followed by big fruits which remain on the tree for many years.

This mallee withstands frost and can be pruned at an early age to retain a compact form and after flowering to maintain shape.

Pear-fruited mallee (*Eucalyptus pyriformis*)

This shrub-like tree grows to about 3m high and wide, usually with a single trunk but can be multi-stemmed.

Shiny, red, smooth bark contrasts with the thick, pale, grey-green leaves.

Big flowers, up to 6cm wide in white, cream, yellow or red, appear in winter to spring and are followed by large, ribbed, pear-shaped buds and big, hemispherical fruits.

This mallee is frost tolerant and in full sun should be left to develop without pruning.

Small-leaved mottlecah (*Eucalyptus macrocarpa subspecies elachantha*)

Gardeners who have insufficient space for the spectacular, sprawling *Eucalyptus macrocarpa* should consider planting this smaller sub species.

This variety has a variable growth habit of 0.8m to 4m tall with grey leaves that are 10cm wide and 7cm long.

It has smooth grey to salmon-pink bark and striking, stalkless, pink to red flowers about 6cm to 8cm wide in late winter and early spring.

A white bloom covers the buds and the 6cm wide fruits.

This tree may not respond well to pruning, but this should be unnecessary.

Bookleaf mallee (*Eucalyptus kruseana*)

For those with really restricted space this is an ideal ornamental shrub, growing to just 2m tall and 1.5m wide.

Features include reddish brown bark that splits and rolls to reveal the pale green inner bark and tiny, round, blue-grey, stalkless leaves which cling densely to the branches like a 'bookleaf'.

Pink buds are clustered near the ends of the branches and open as small creamy-yellow flowers that encircle the branches like floral bracelets. Young stems and fruit are blue or grey-green with a white, waxy bloom.

Trees may flower while very young and should be pruned lightly when immature to establish a compact shape.

In home gardens the frost tolerant species often develops a single trunk rather than the multiple stems of a mallee.

The plant is rare, but not endangered.

Western coolibah (*Eucalyptus victrix*)

Growing to 6m with a smooth, ghost gum-like white trunk, this coolibah has an irregular growth pattern which provides dappled shade.

Leaves are blue-green and set off by small cream flowers which appear in summer.

It is suitable for all soil types and is naturally found on flood plains and low lying areas of red clay or clay loam.

Plant availability

These eucalypts are usually available from the Friends of Kings Park Plant Sale. Visit the KPBG website, www.bgpa.wa.gov.au for the date and time.

All trees except *Eucalyptus brandiana* and *Eucalyptus beardiana* are available as seed from Nindethana Seed Service, phone 08 9844 3533 or www.nindethana.net.au.

Tip

The word mallee is used to describe a species of eucalypt with multiple stems arising from a lignotuber, or swelling at the base.

A mallet is single-stemmed and lacks a lignotuber.